MRBALLEN PRESENTS

STRANGE, DARK & MYSTERIOUS

THE GRAPHIC STORIES

STORIES BY MRBALLEN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANDREA MUTTI

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TO ELLA, CORA,
HENRY, AND DYLAN.
YOU ARE COOLER
THAN YOU KNOW.

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INTRODUCTION

I still remember the *weight* of my mom's letters to me when I was in boot camp for the Navy in 2010. Each envelope was huge—a half-inch thick, sometimes more.

An officer would hand out our mail, and I would take it back to my bunk. When I opened those letters, every grueling thing in my life—the endless pushups, the screaming drill instructors, the brutally cold Chicago winter—just disappeared.

Because my mom sent me *stories*.

My favorite books were by a writer named Lee Child, about the insane adventures of a retired military police officer named Jack Reacher. There were so many rules in boot camp, and one of them was: I couldn't have anything that didn't fit in my tiny footlocker. So—no books. But my mom got around this rule by tearing out individual chapters and mailing them to me one at a time.

It didn't matter that my instructors gave me the chapters out of order, or that they threw some of them straight into the trash just to mess with me. As soon as I started reading, I was no longer trapped inside a single room with fifty other exhausted recruits, hungry and sore and missing home.

Instead, I was out in South Dakota with the hero Jack Reacher, up to my knees in bad guys and a blinding snowstorm, traveling through life with only a toothbrush in my pocket and a bus ticket to the next town.

Even if I fell asleep after a single page, it was easier to get up the next morning and face another sixteen hours of forced silence, rigid discipline, and punishing exercise.

Today, when people ask me how I went from being a Navy SEAL to telling strange, dark, and mysterious stories on the internet, my mind goes back to that winter—and those books.

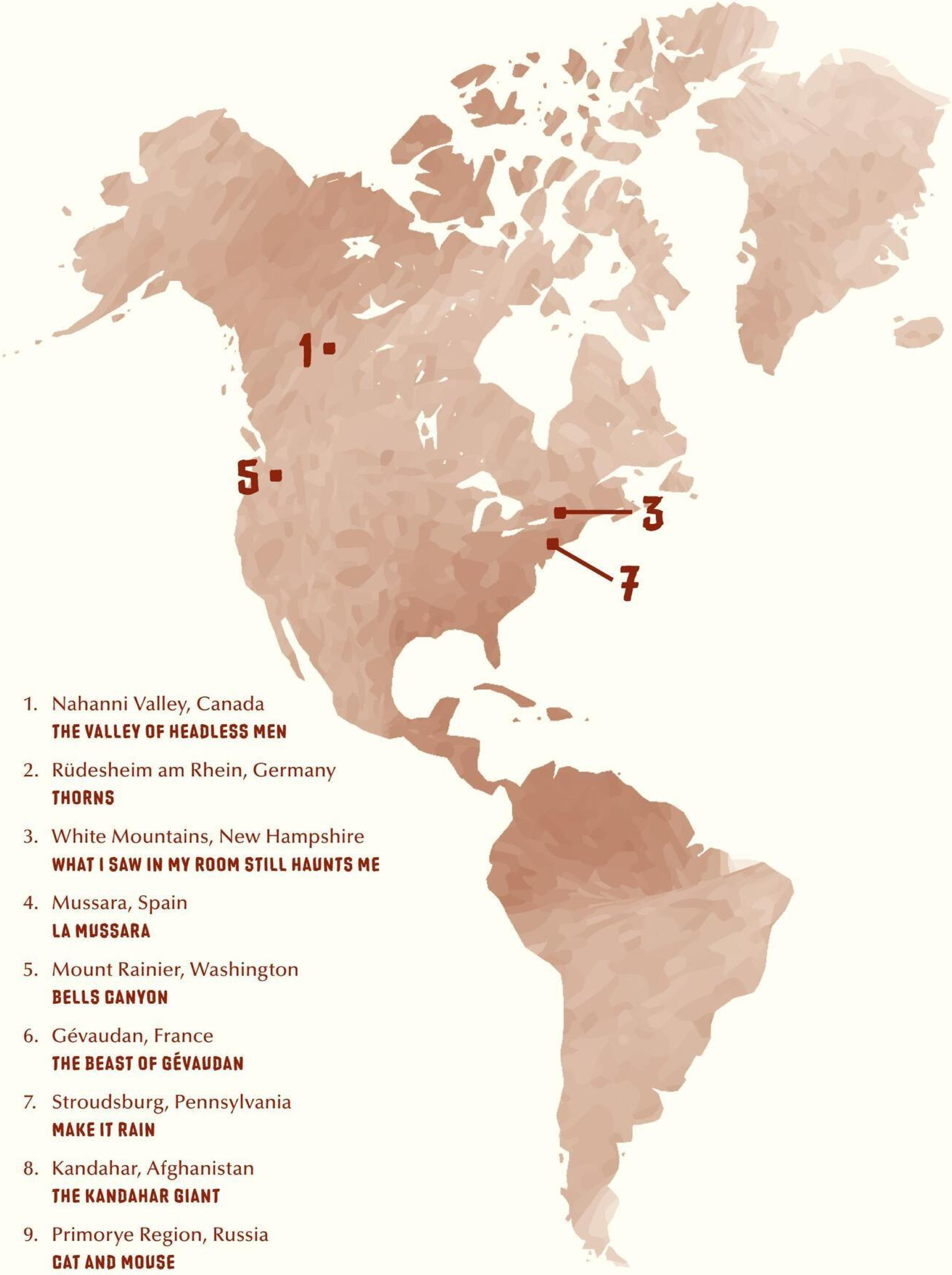
It's why I decided to take some of my stories and turn them into the book you now hold in your hands. They're all based on real events, rendered into the art form of the graphic novel.

You can open this book and go far, far away—to the Headless Valley, where demons stalk the wilderness; to a village in Spain, where a ghostly fog hangs; to the French countryside in the late 1700s, where a nightmarish beast hunts the children. Linger on the illustrations. This is a wilderness of monsters and spirits and heroes and cowards, filled with real terrors—as well as the terrors in our own minds—and shared in campfire stories on paper.

My military career ended when I got injured. Today, I'm thankful for that. It allowed me to pursue my true passion—telling stories, like the ones that got me through boot camp.

A book is an escape, and I hope you enjoy reading this one as much as I enjoyed writing it.

MrBallen



1. Nahanni Valley, Canada
   THE VALLEY OF HEADLESS MEN
2. Rüdesheim am Rhein, Germany
   THORNS
3. White Mountains, New Hampshire
   WHAT I SAW IN MY ROOM STILL HAUNTS ME
4. Mussara, Spain
   LA MUSSARA
5. Mount Rainier, Washington
   BELLS CANYON
6. Gévaudan, France
   THE BEAST OF GÉVAUDAN
7. Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania
   MAKE IT RAIN
8. Kandahar, Afghanistan
   THE KANDAHAR GIANT
9. Primorye Region, Russia
   CAT AND MOUSE

2
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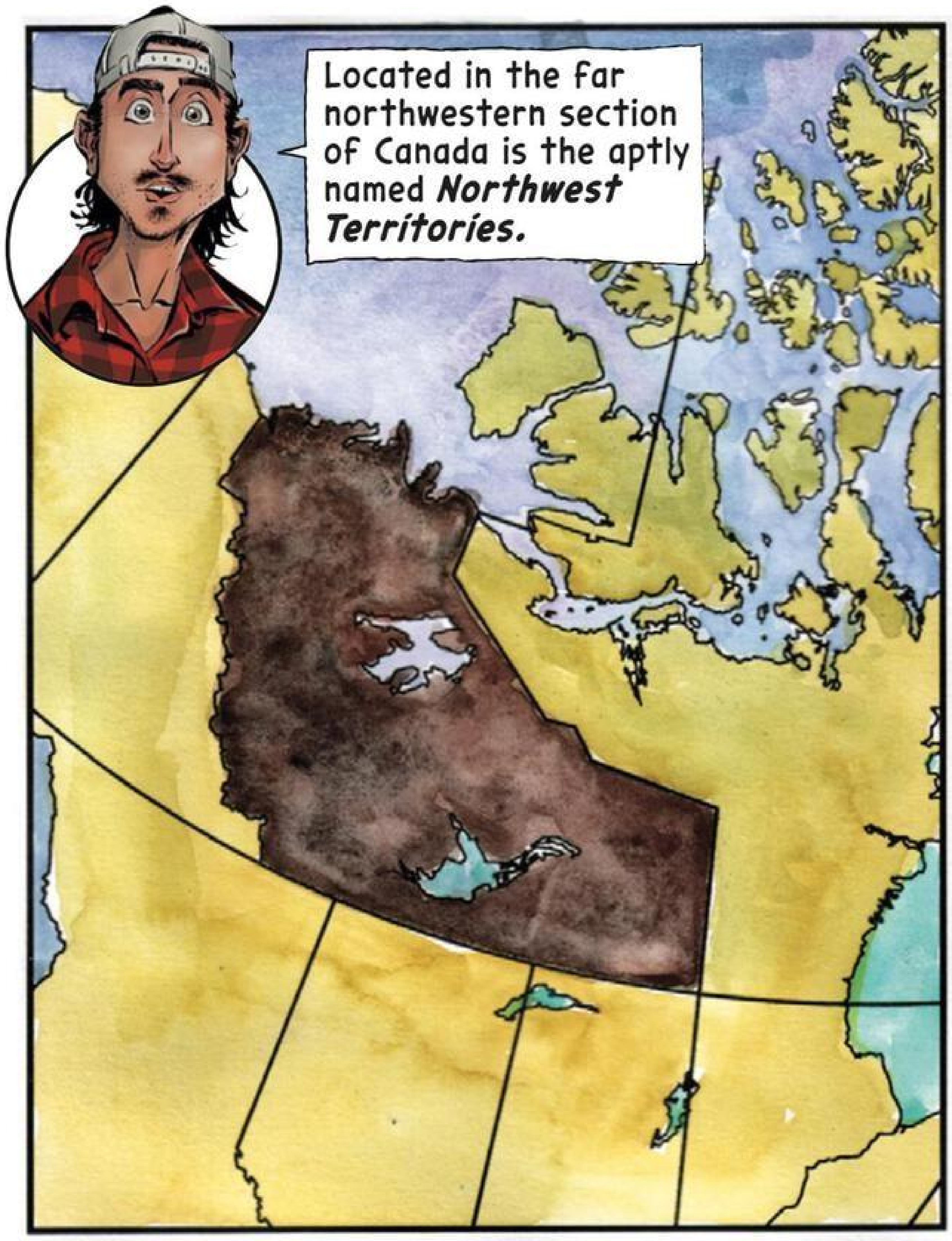
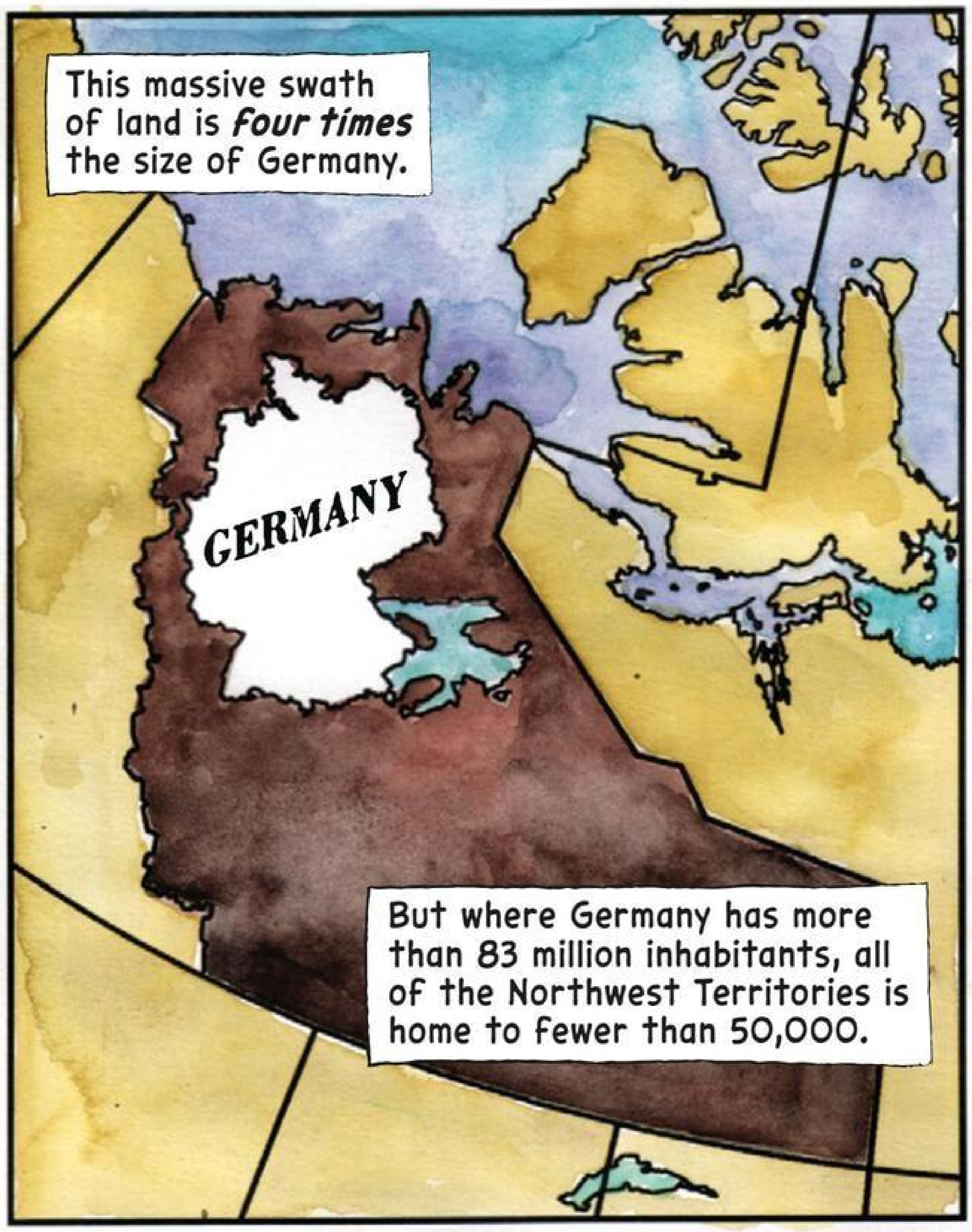
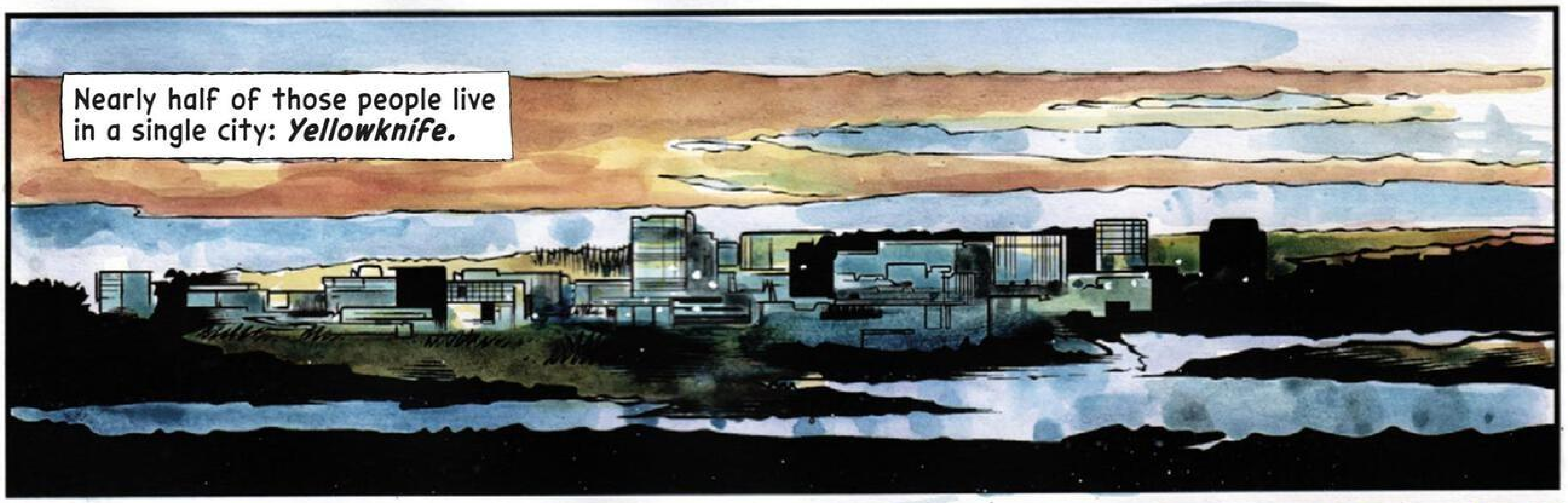
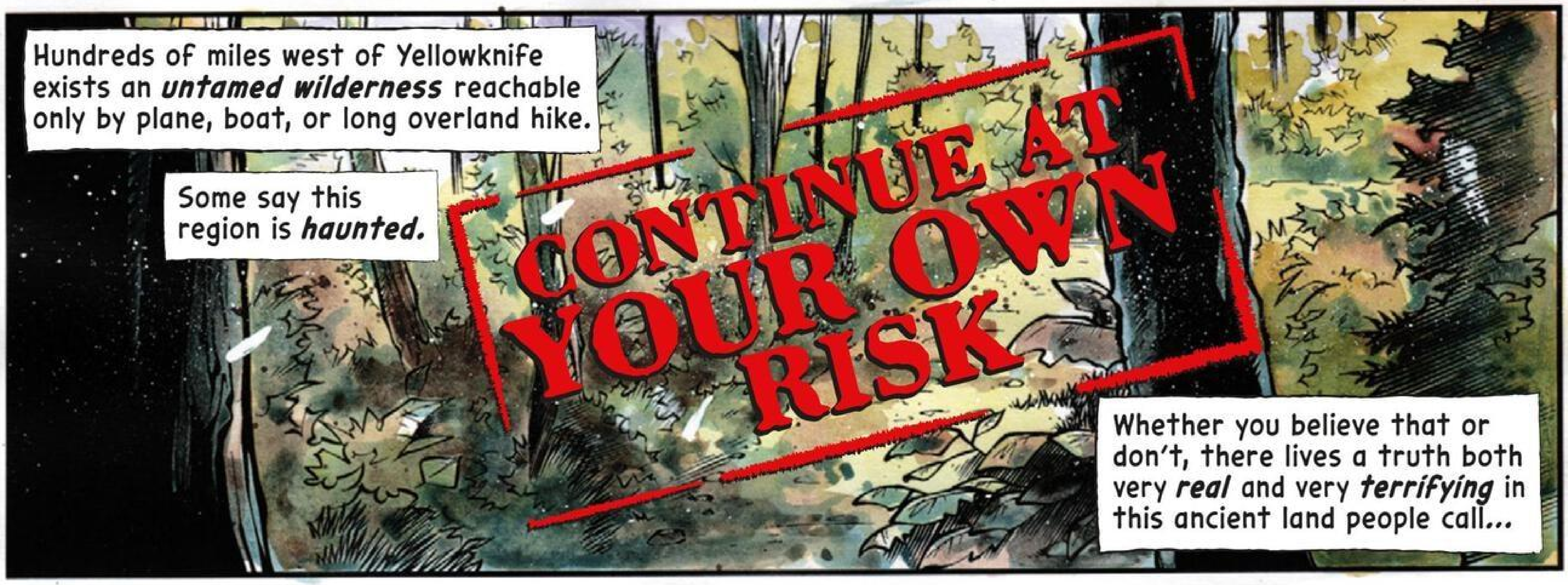
4
8
9

THE VALLEY OF HEADLESS MEN


Located in the far northwestern section of Canada is the aptly named ***Northwest Territories.***


This massive swath of land is ***four times*** the size of Germany.
GERMANY
But where Germany has more than 83 million inhabitants, all of the Northwest Territories is home to fewer than 50,000.


Nearly half of those people live in a single city: ***Yellowknife.***


Hundreds of miles west of Yellowknife exists an ***untamed wilderness*** reachable only by plane, boat, or long overland hike.
Some say this region is ***haunted.***
CONTINUE AT YOUR OWN RISK
Whether you believe that or don't, there lives a truth both very ***real*** and very ***terrifying*** in this ancient land people call...

...the *Valley of Headless Men.*

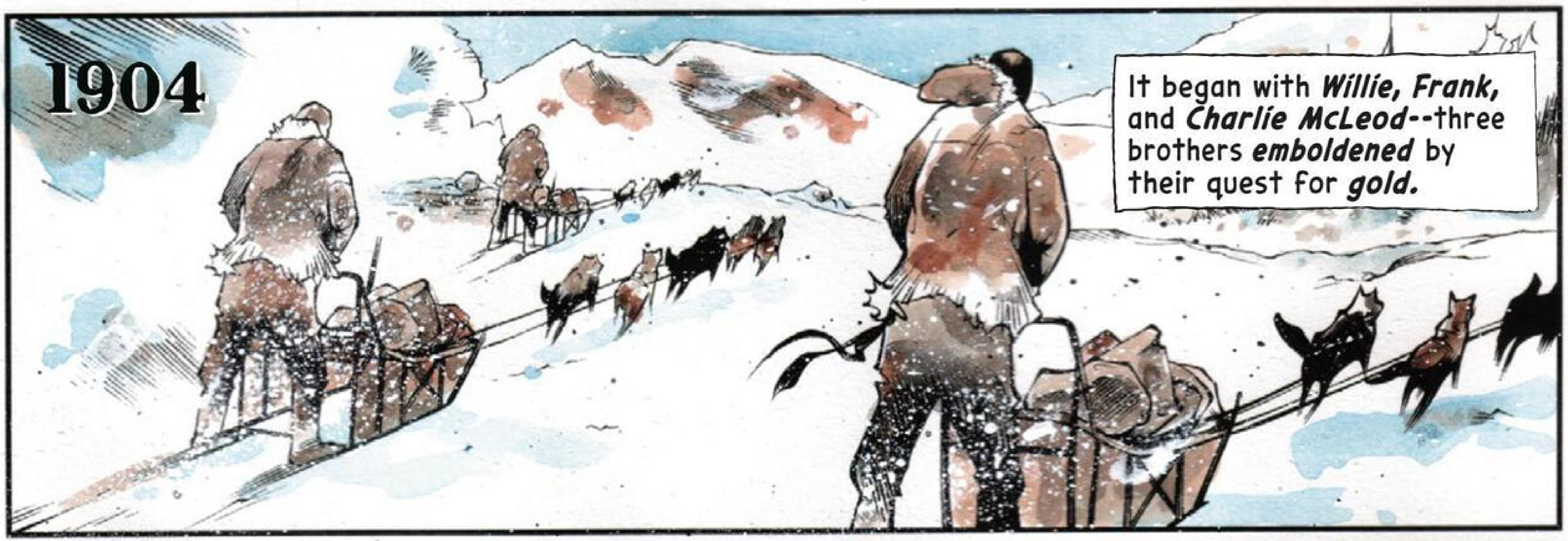
On a map, it is called the *Nahanni Valley.* Those who are able to reach it have the opportunity to explore one of the most *beautiful* places on Earth.

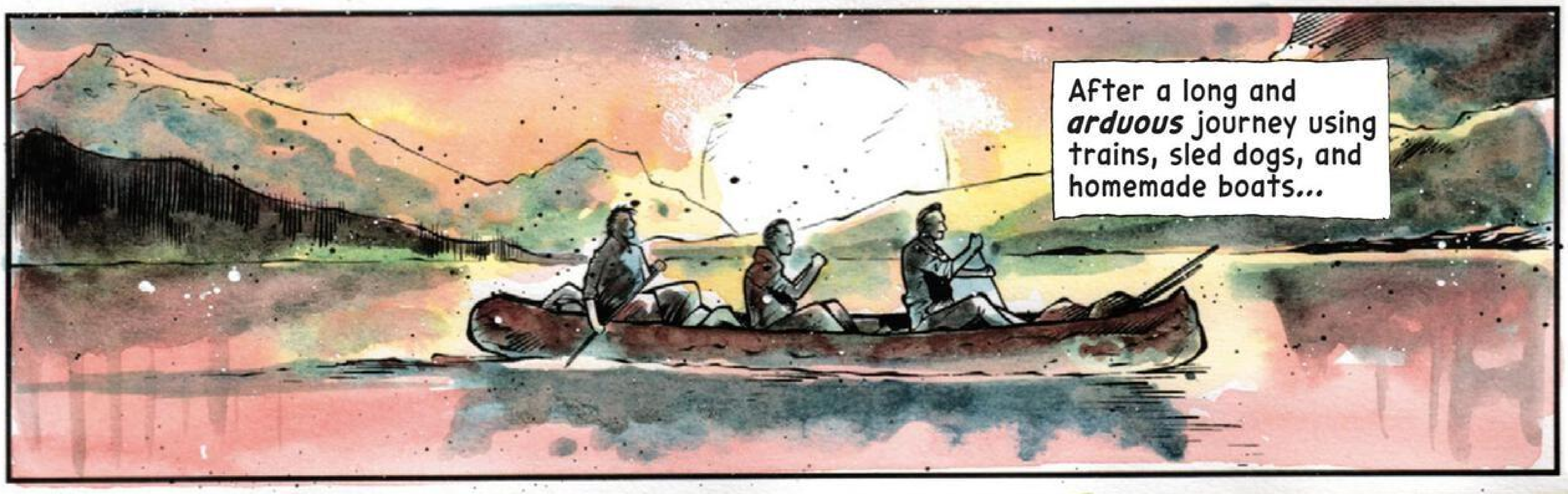
It is nature in its *purest* form, virtually untouched by man...

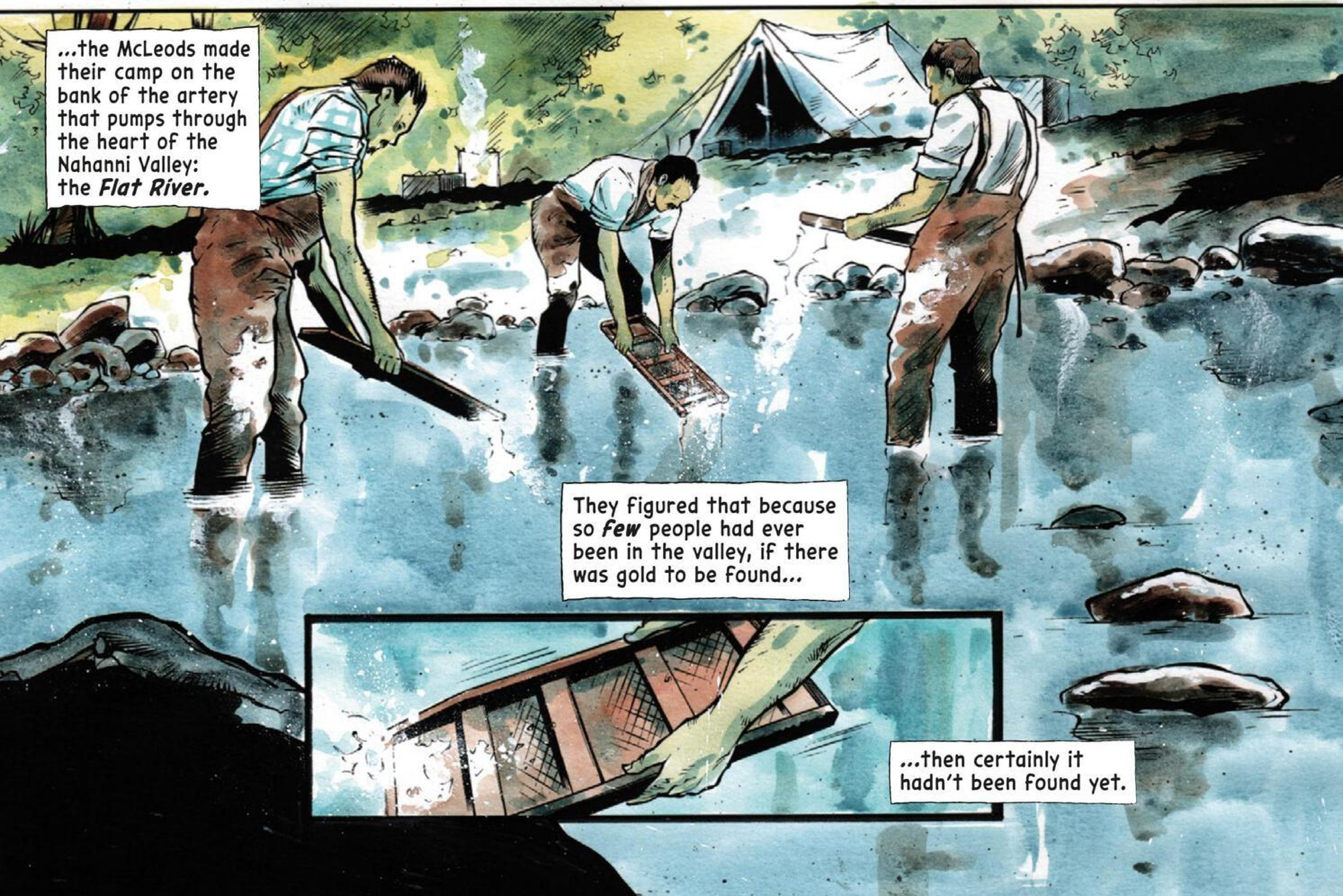
...for a *reason.*

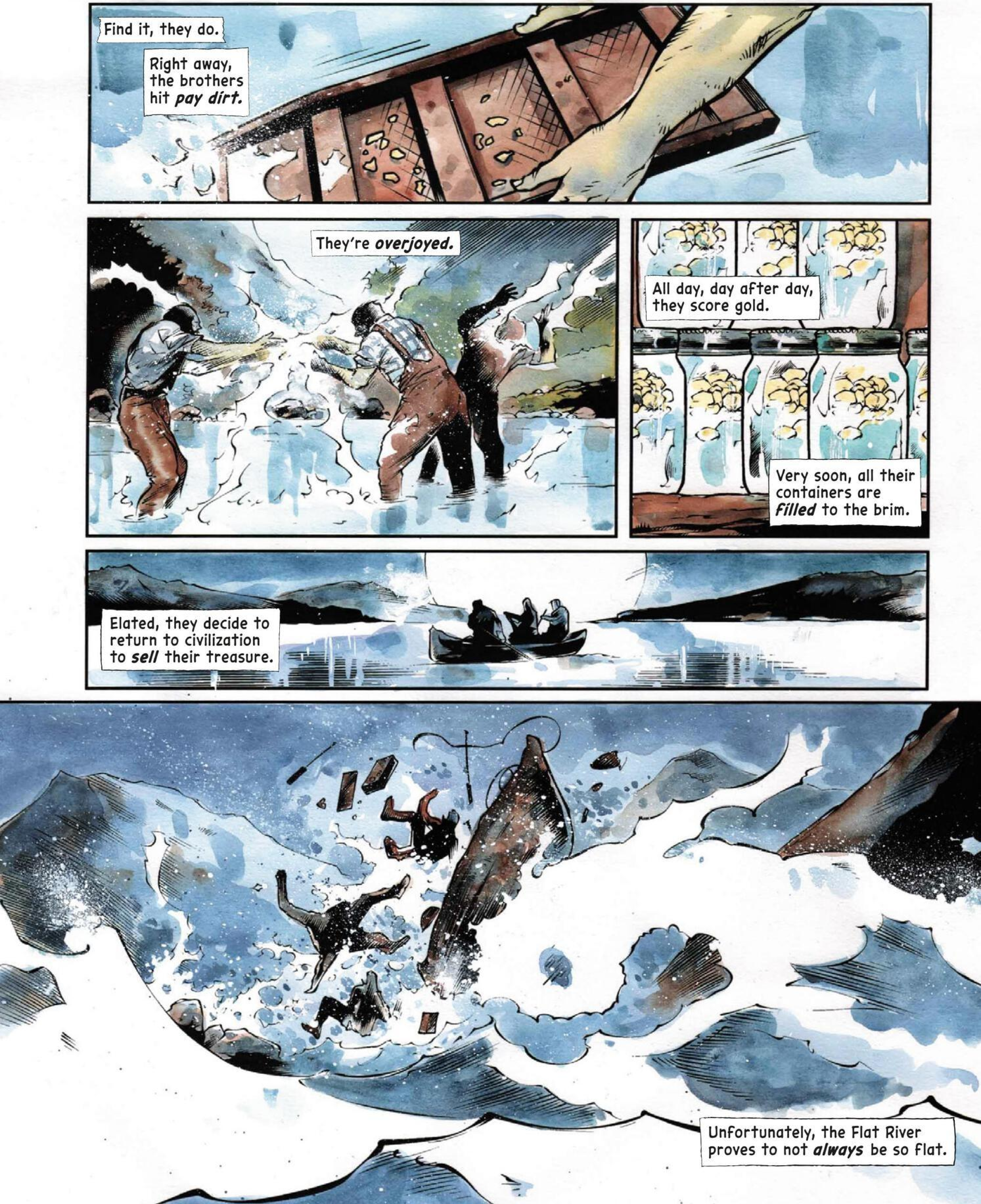
Stories are told of the fearsome *Naha Tribe* who once inhabited the valley, only to suddenly *disappear* without a trace, leaving behind their shelters, supplies, and even their food.

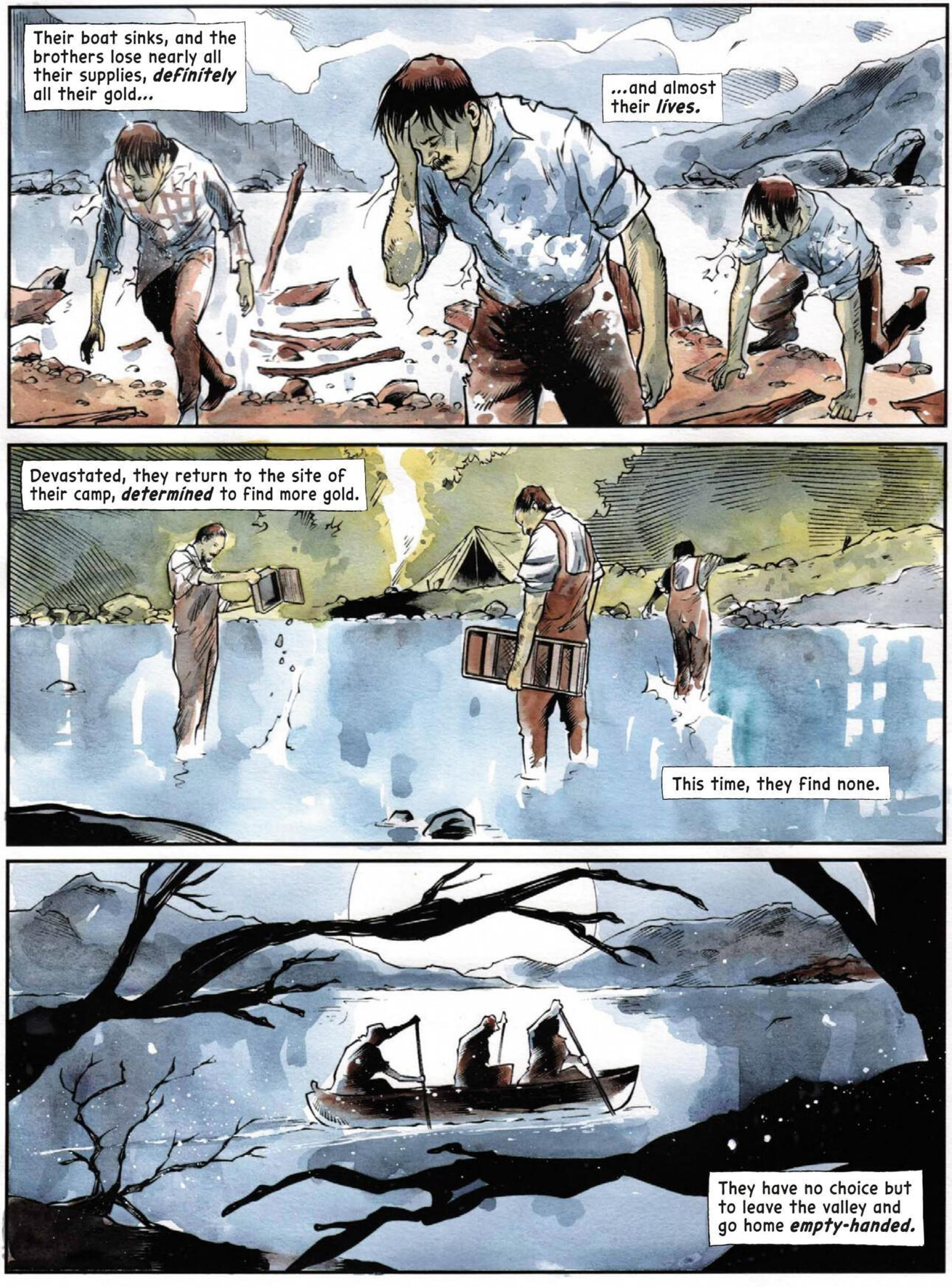
Over the centuries, other native tribes attempted to settle here. They, too, abruptly fled, claiming to have been ***terrorized*** and ***stalked*** by white demons or other creatures lurking in the forest.
Of course, this sounds like just folklore. And it might very well be.
But in the early 1900s, some ***very strange*** things started to happen that weren't folklore. They were horrifying ***real*** events.

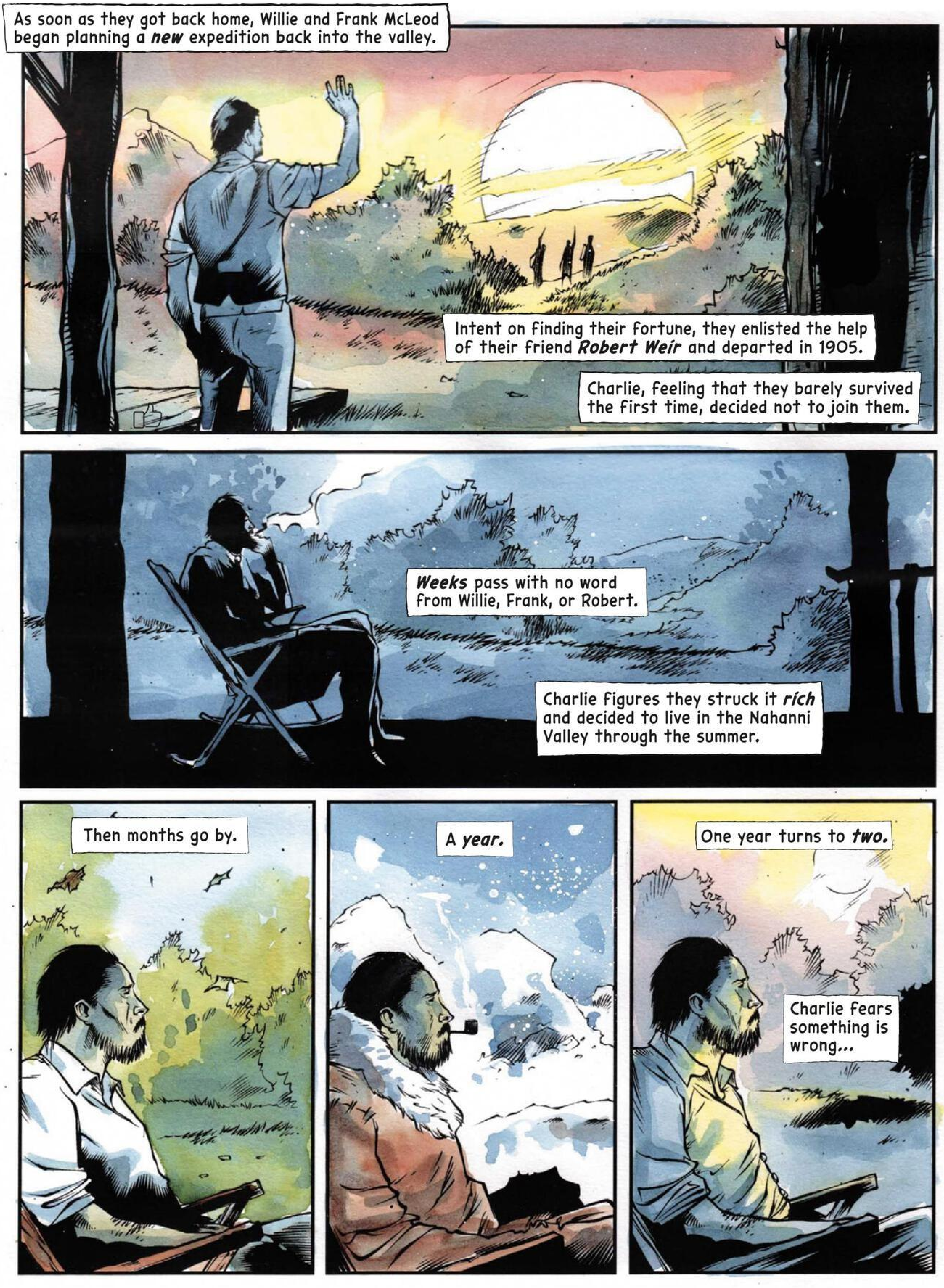

1904
It began with *Willie, Frank,* and *Charlie McLeod*--three brothers ***emboldened*** by their quest for ***gold.***

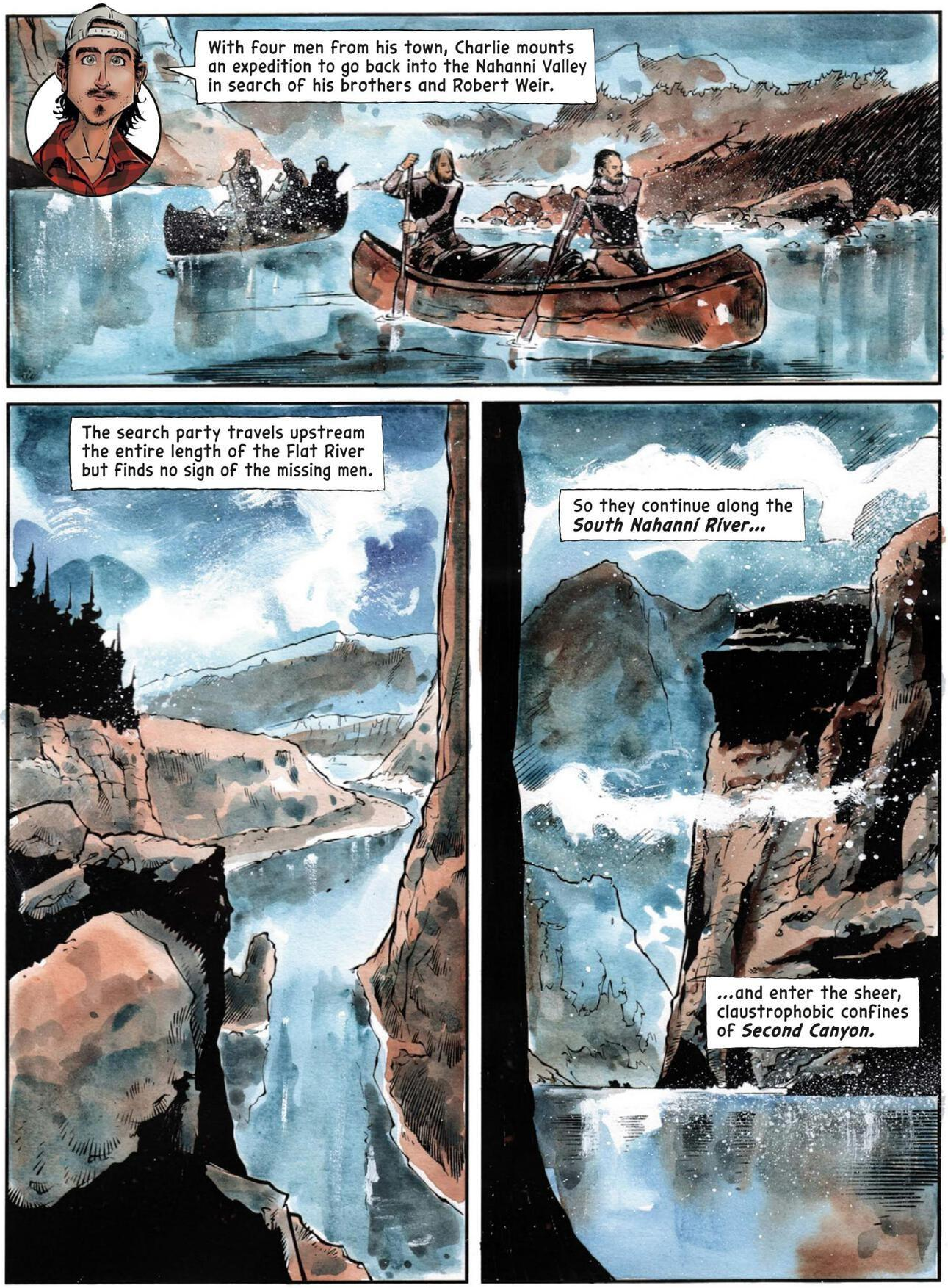

After a long and ***arduous*** journey using trains, sled dogs, and homemade boats...

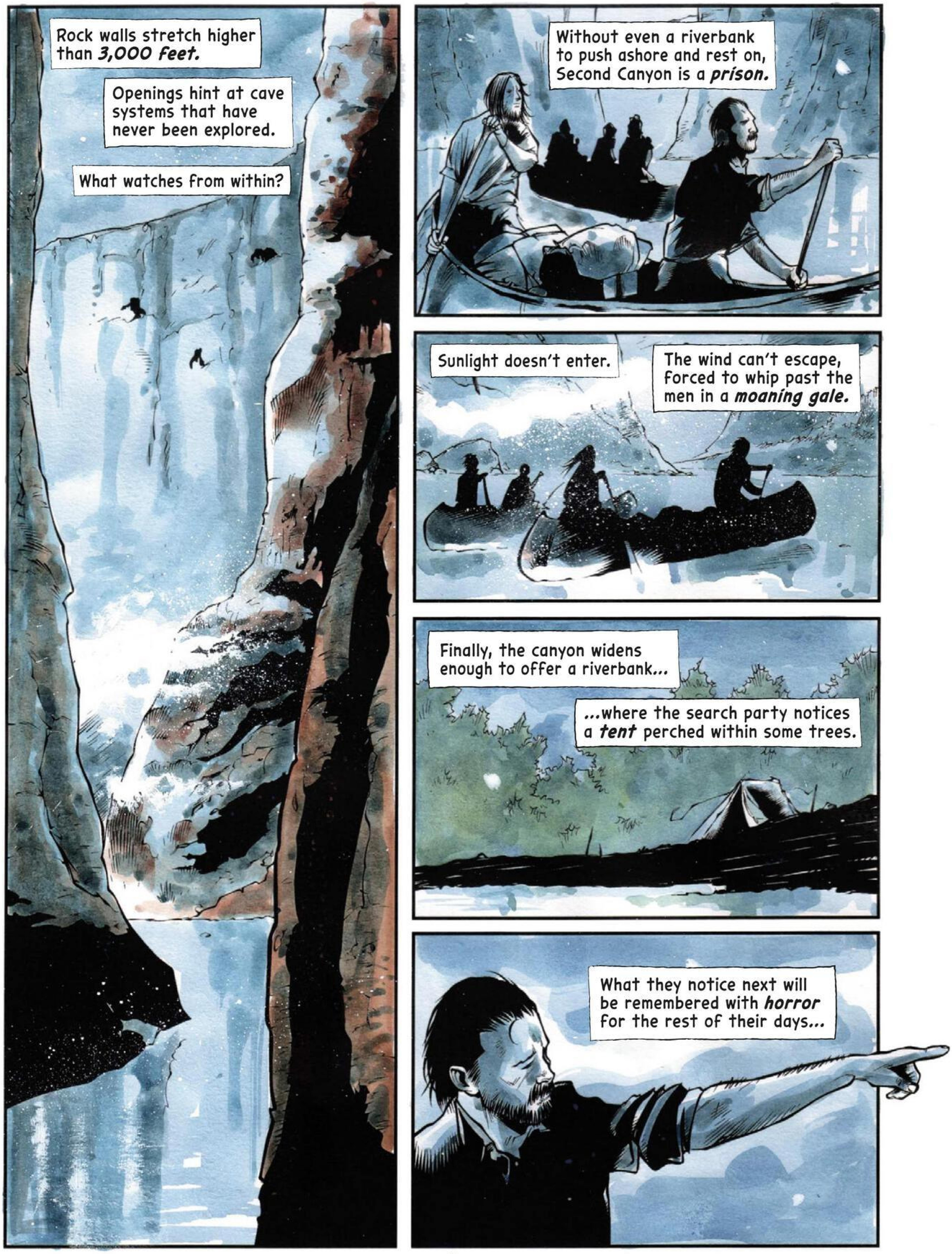

...the McLeods made their camp on the bank of the artery that pumps through the heart of the Nahanni Valley: the ***Flat River.***
They figured that because so ***few*** people had ever been in the valley, if there was gold to be found...
...then certainly it hadn't been found yet.

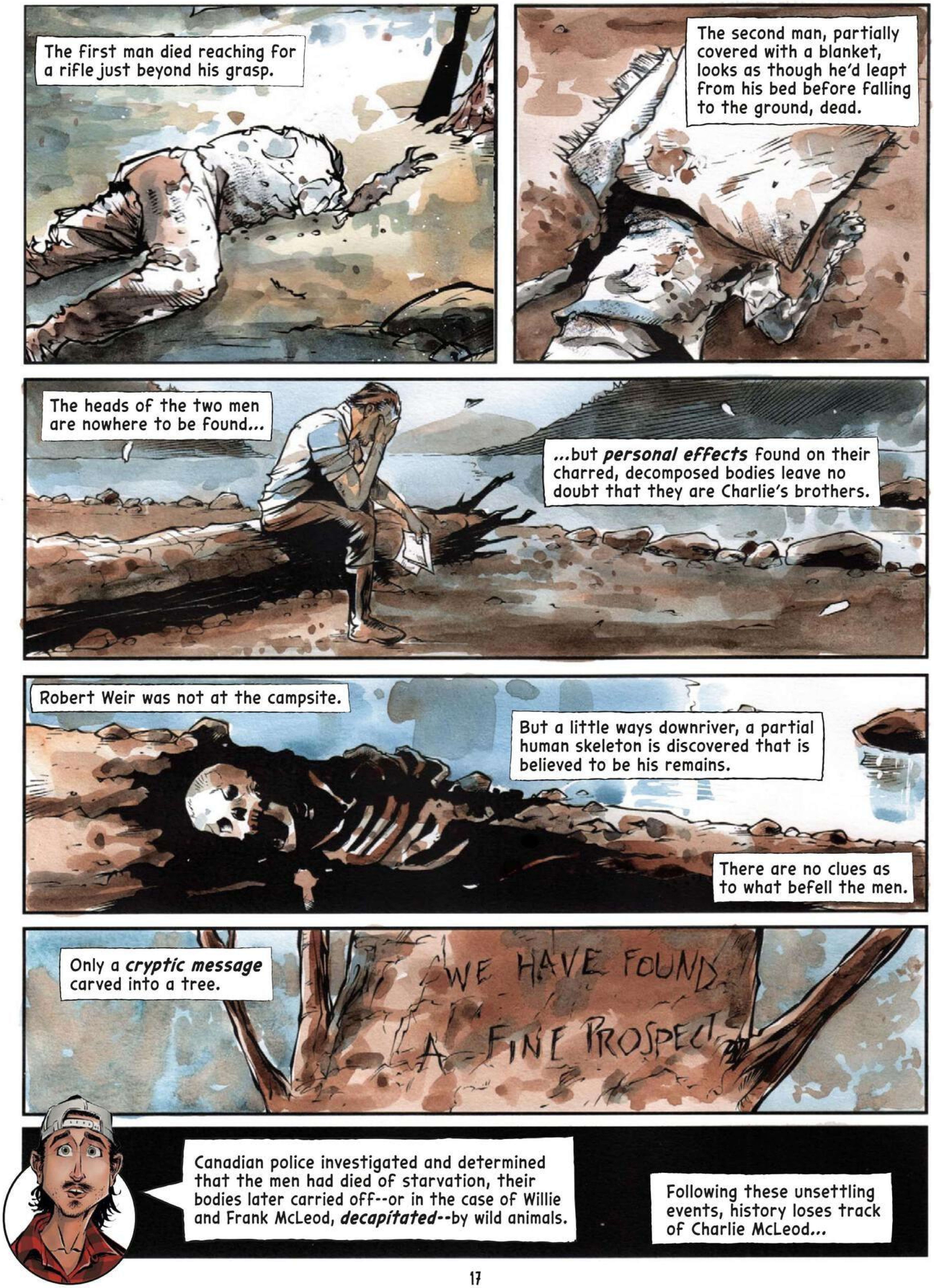

Find it, they do.
Right away, the brothers hit *pay dirt.*
They're *overjoyed.*
All day, day after day, they score gold.
Very soon, all their containers are *filled* to the brim.
Elated, they decide to return to civilization to *sell* their treasure.
Unfortunately, the Flat River proves to not *always* be so flat.

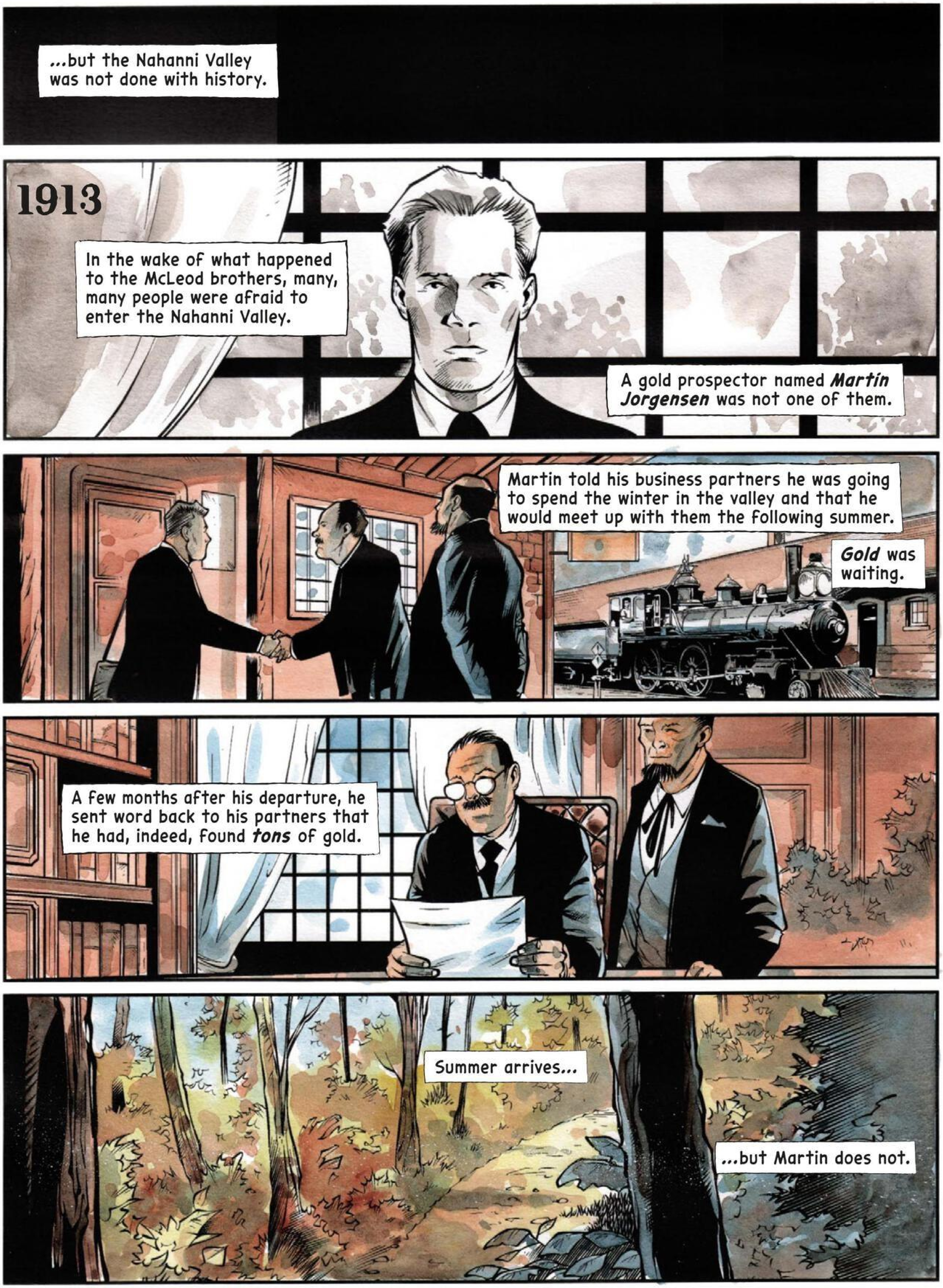

Their boat sinks, and the brothers lose nearly all their supplies, ***definitely*** all their gold...
...and almost their ***lives.***
Devastated, they return to the site of their camp, ***determined*** to find more gold.
This time, they find none.
They have no choice but to leave the valley and go home ***empty-handed.***

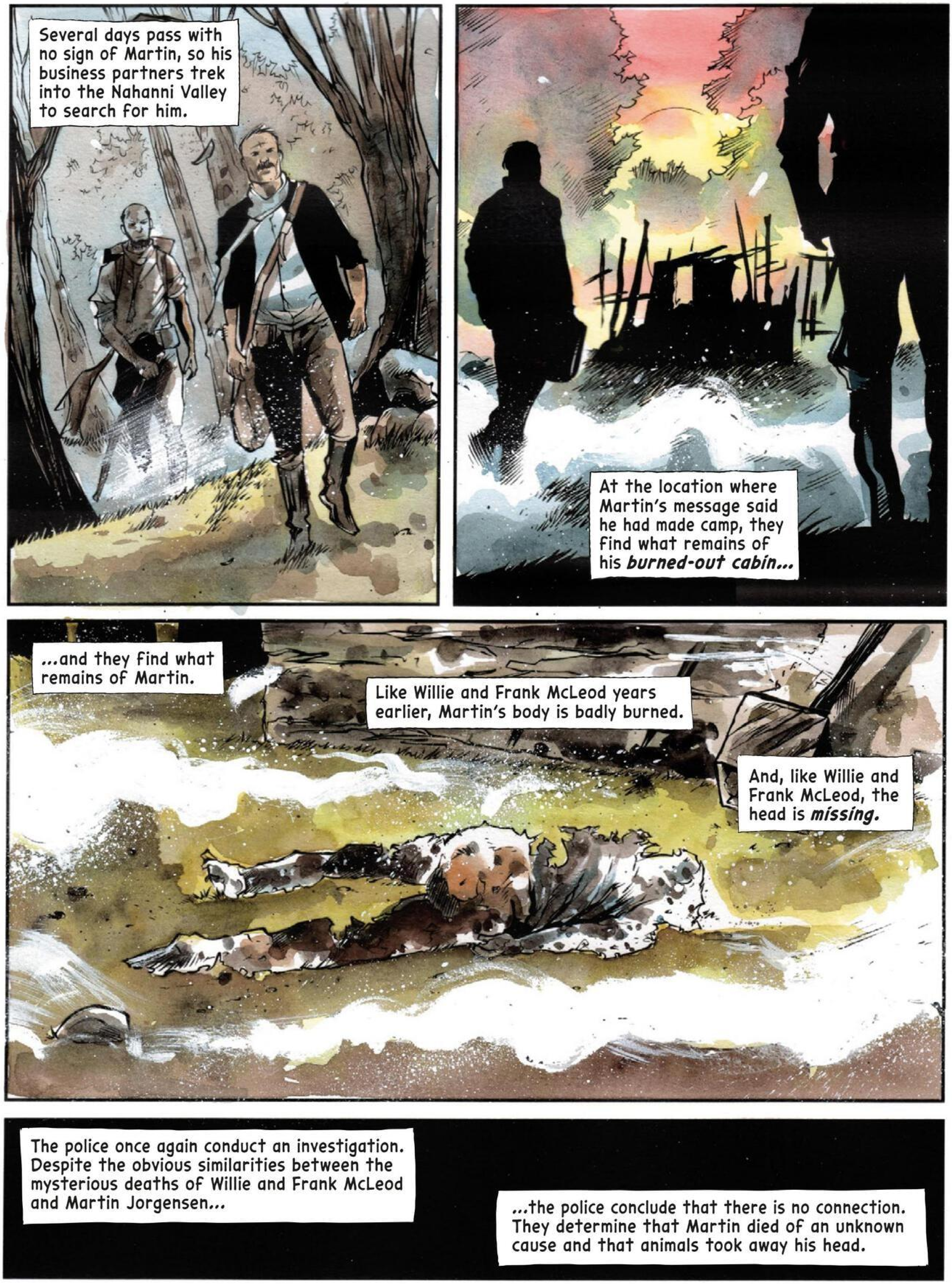

As soon as they got back home, Willie and Frank McLeod began planning a ***new*** expedition back into the valley.
Intent on finding their fortune, they enlisted the help of their friend ***Robert Weir*** and departed in 1905.
Charlie, feeling that they barely survived the first time, decided not to join them.
Weeks pass with no word from Willie, Frank, or Robert.
Charlie figures they struck it ***rich*** and decided to live in the Nahanni Valley through the summer.
Then months go by.
A ***year.***
One year turns to ***two.***
Charlie fears something is wrong...


With four men from his town, Charlie mounts an expedition to go back into the Nahanni Valley in search of his brothers and Robert Weir.
The search party travels upstream the entire length of the Flat River but finds no sign of the missing men.
So they continue along the *South Nahanni River...*
...and enter the sheer, claustrophobic confines of *Second Canyon.*


Rock walls stretch higher than 3,000 feet.
Openings hint at cave systems that have never been explored.
What watches from within?
Without even a riverbank to push ashore and rest on, Second Canyon is a prison.
Sunlight doesn't enter.
The wind can't escape, forced to whip past the men in a moaning gale.
Finally, the canyon widens enough to offer a riverbank...
...where the search party notices a tent perched within some trees.
What they notice next will be remembered with horror for the rest of their days...

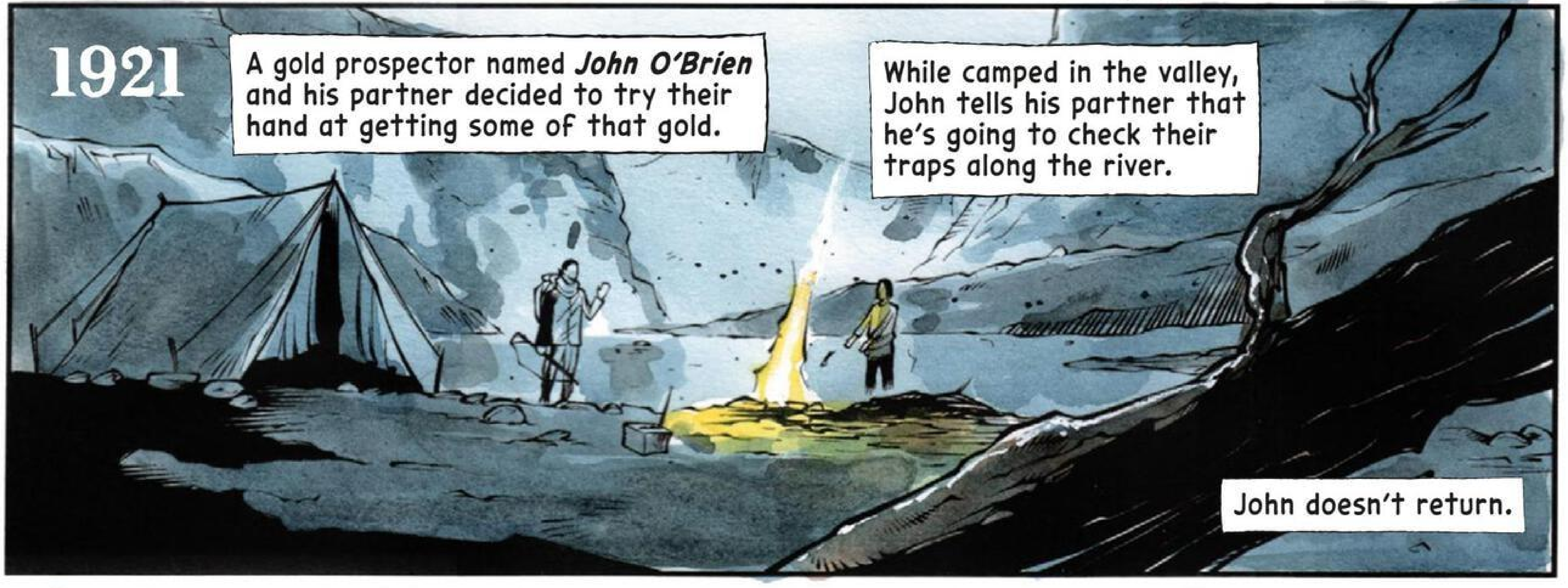

The first man died reaching for a rifle just beyond his grasp.
The second man, partially covered with a blanket, looks as though he'd leapt from his bed before falling to the ground, dead.
The heads of the two men are nowhere to be found...
...but *personal effects* found on their charred, decomposed bodies leave no doubt that they are Charlie's brothers.
Robert Weir was not at the campsite.
But a little ways downriver, a partial human skeleton is discovered that is believed to be his remains.
There are no clues as to what befell the men.
Only a *cryptic message* carved into a tree.
WE HAVE FOUND A FINE PROSPECT
Canadian police investigated and determined that the men had died of starvation, their bodies later carried off--or in the case of Willie and Frank McLeod, *decapitated*--by wild animals.
Following these unsettling events, history loses track of Charlie McLeod...


...but the Nahanni Valley was not done with history.
1913
In the wake of what happened to the McLeod brothers, many, many people were afraid to enter the Nahanni Valley.
A gold prospector named ***Martin Jorgensen*** was not one of them.
Martin told his business partners he was going to spend the winter in the valley and that he would meet up with them the following summer.
Gold was waiting.
A few months after his departure, he sent word back to his partners that he had, indeed, found ***tons*** of gold.
Summer arrives...
...but Martin does not.


Several days pass with no sign of Martin, so his business partners trek into the Nahanni Valley to search for him.
At the location where Martin's message said he had made camp, they find what remains of his ***burned-out cabin...***
...and they find what remains of Martin.
Like Willie and Frank McLeod years earlier, Martin's body is badly burned.
And, like Willie and Frank McLeod, the head is ***missing.***
The police once again conduct an investigation. Despite the obvious similarities between the mysterious deaths of Willie and Frank McLeod and Martin Jorgensen...
...the police conclude that there is no connection. They determine that Martin died of an unknown cause and that animals took away his head.

The news of Martin Jorgensen's gruesome death spreads, and the public became convinced there was a killer on the loose in the Nahanni Valley.

Despite the obviously ***fatal risks,*** people continued pouring into the valley to strike it rich.

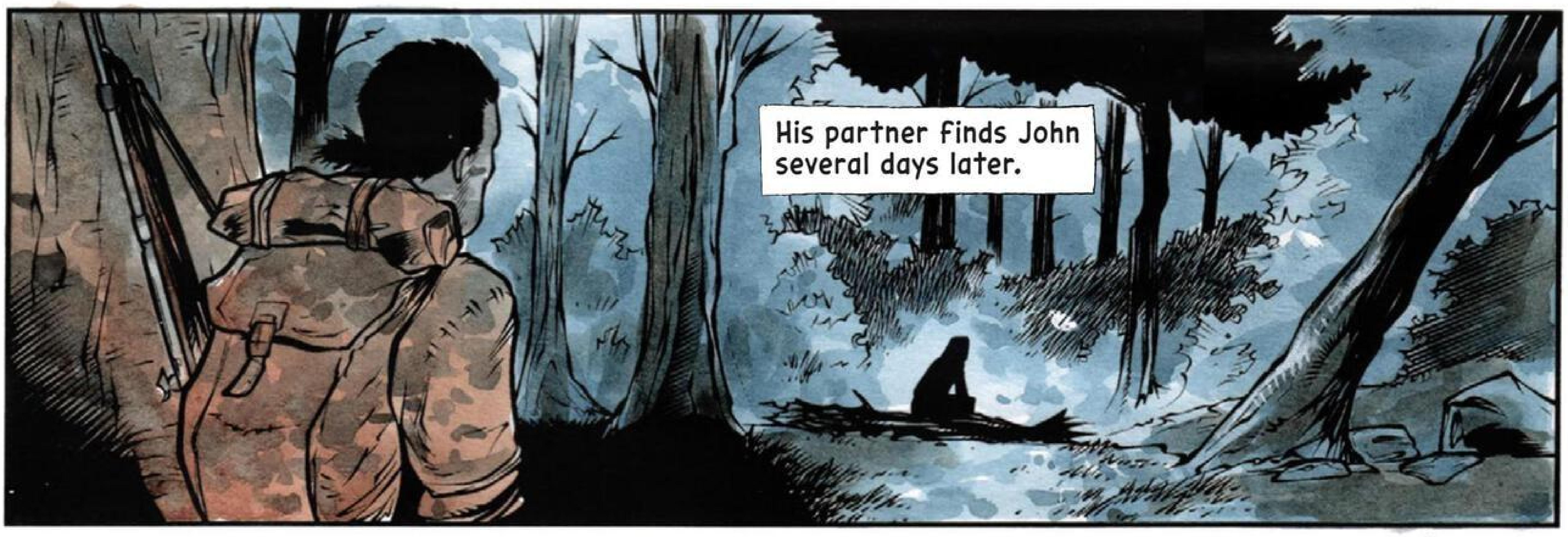


1921

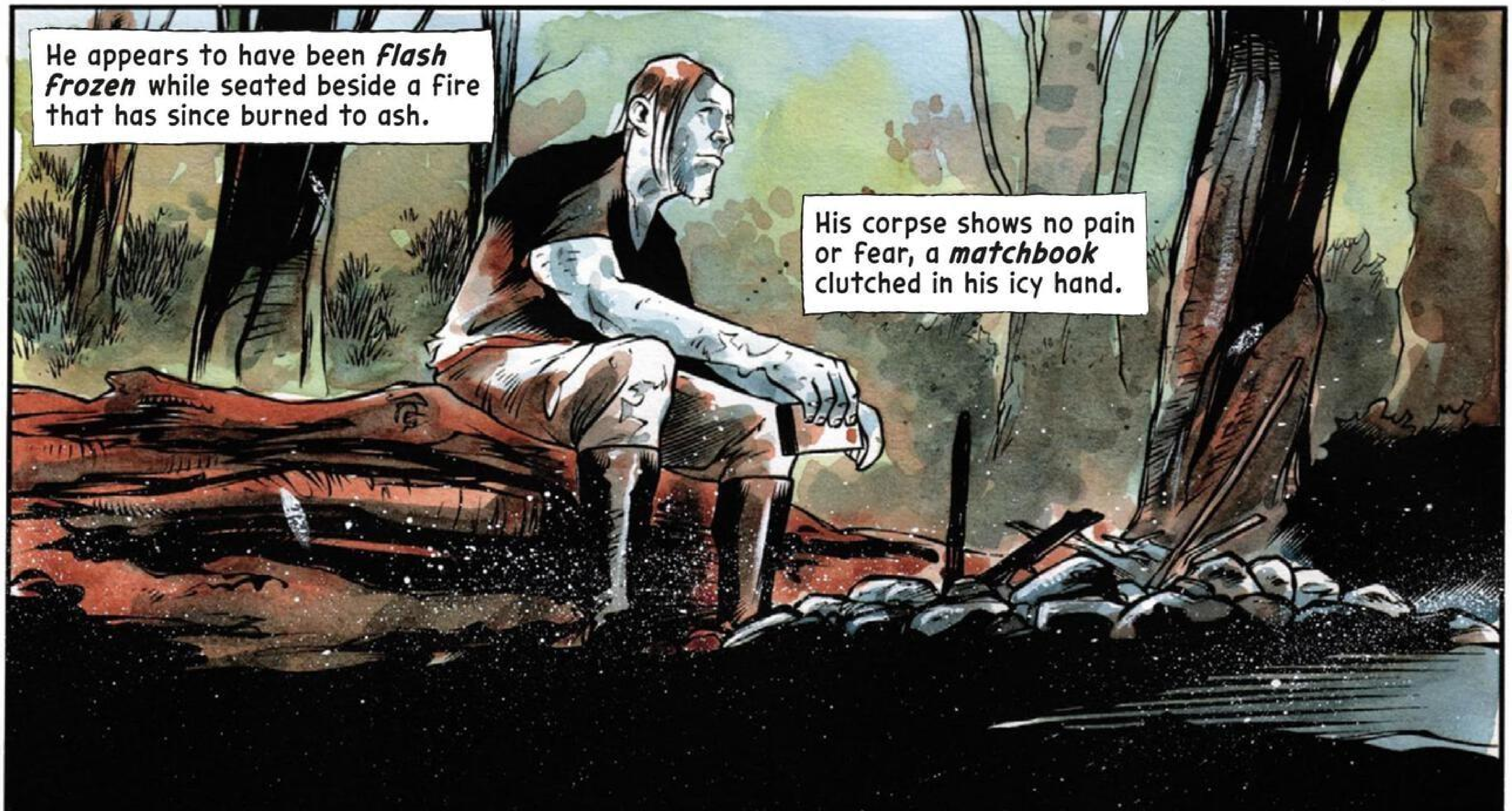
A gold prospector named ***John O'Brien*** and his partner decided to try their hand at getting some of that gold.

While camped in the valley, John tells his partner that he's going to check their traps along the river.

John doesn't return.

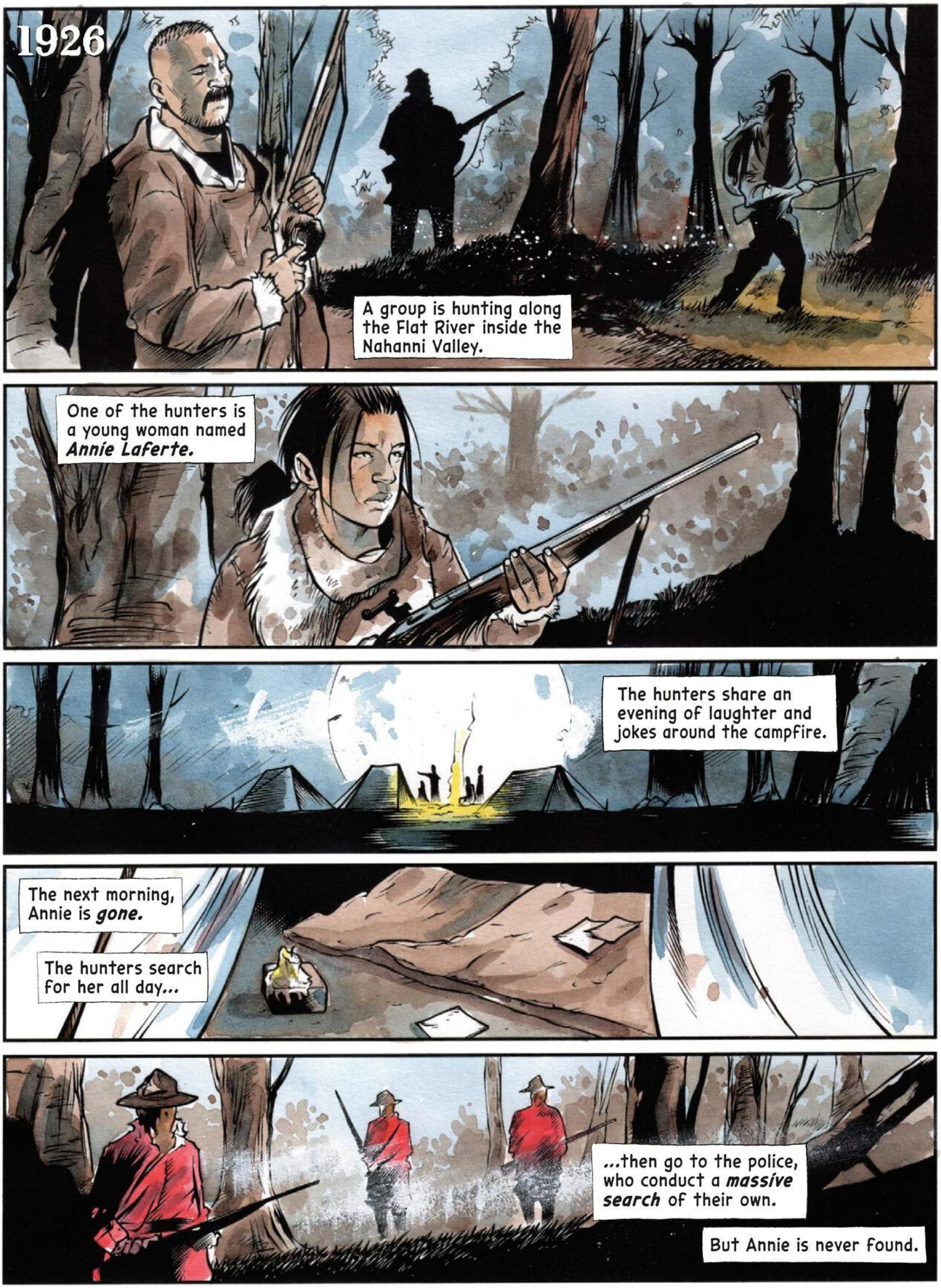


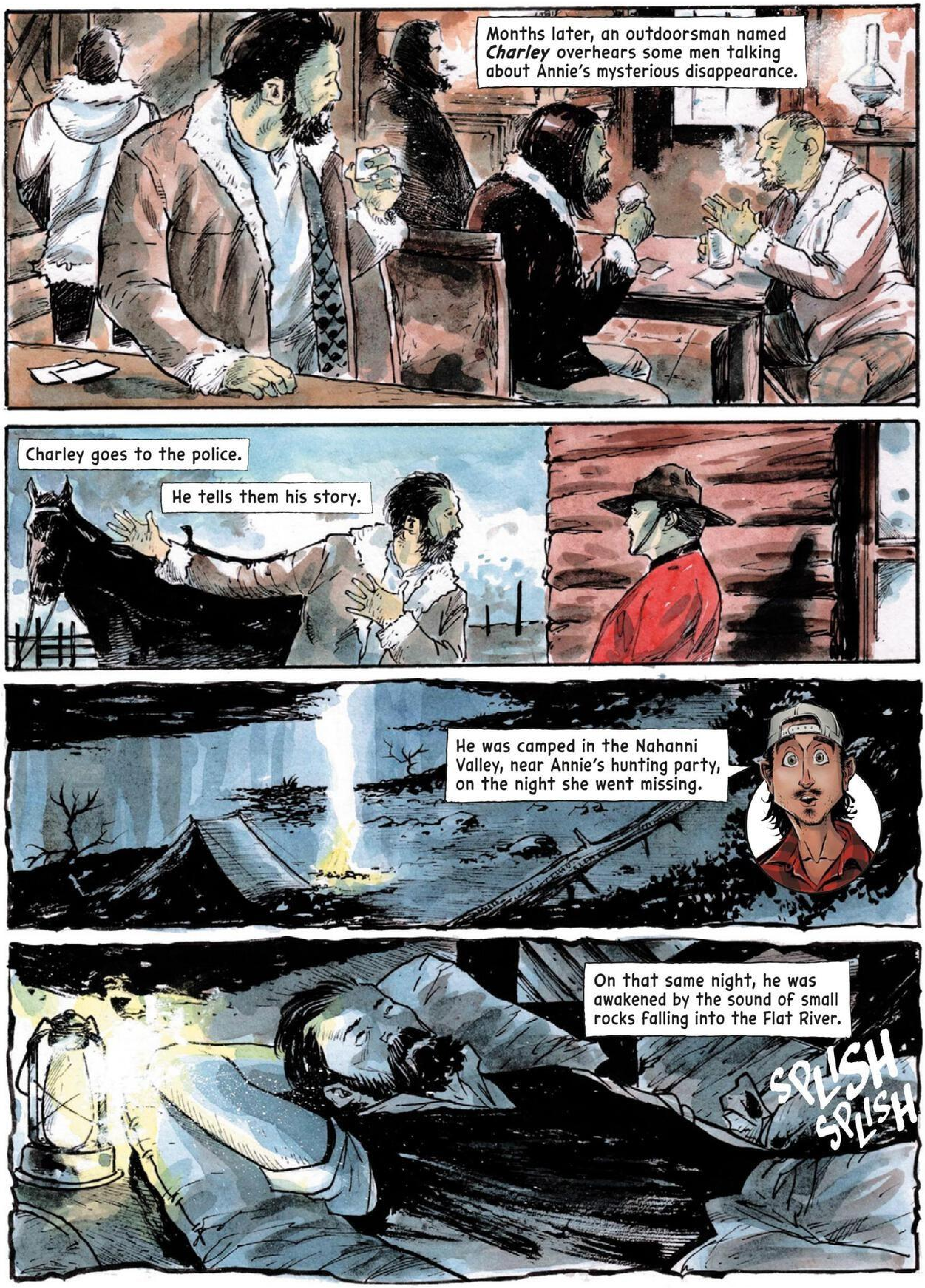
His partner finds John several days later.

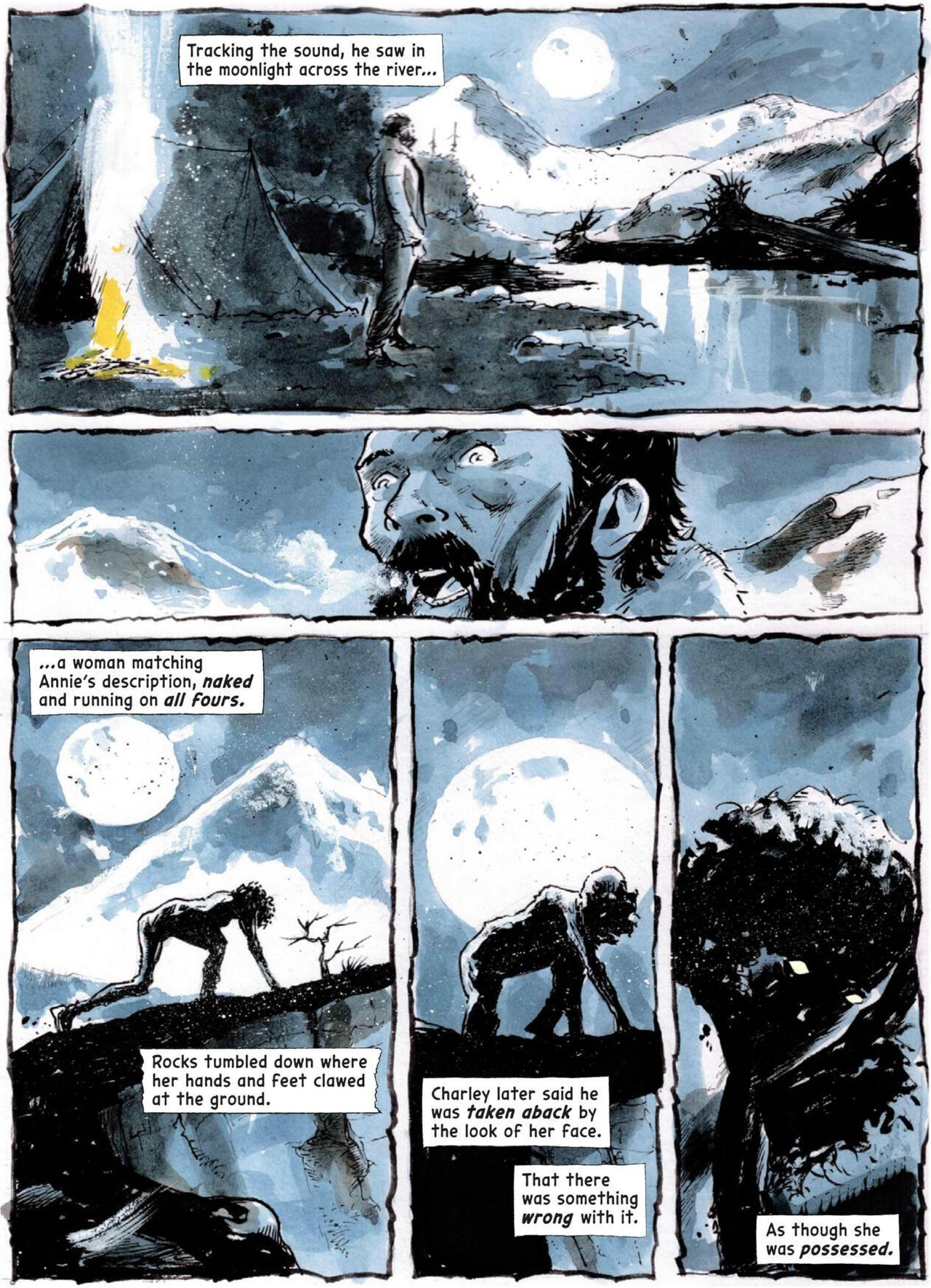


He appears to have been ***flash frozen*** while seated beside a fire that has since burned to ash.

His corpse shows no pain or fear, a ***matchbook*** clutched in his icy hand.

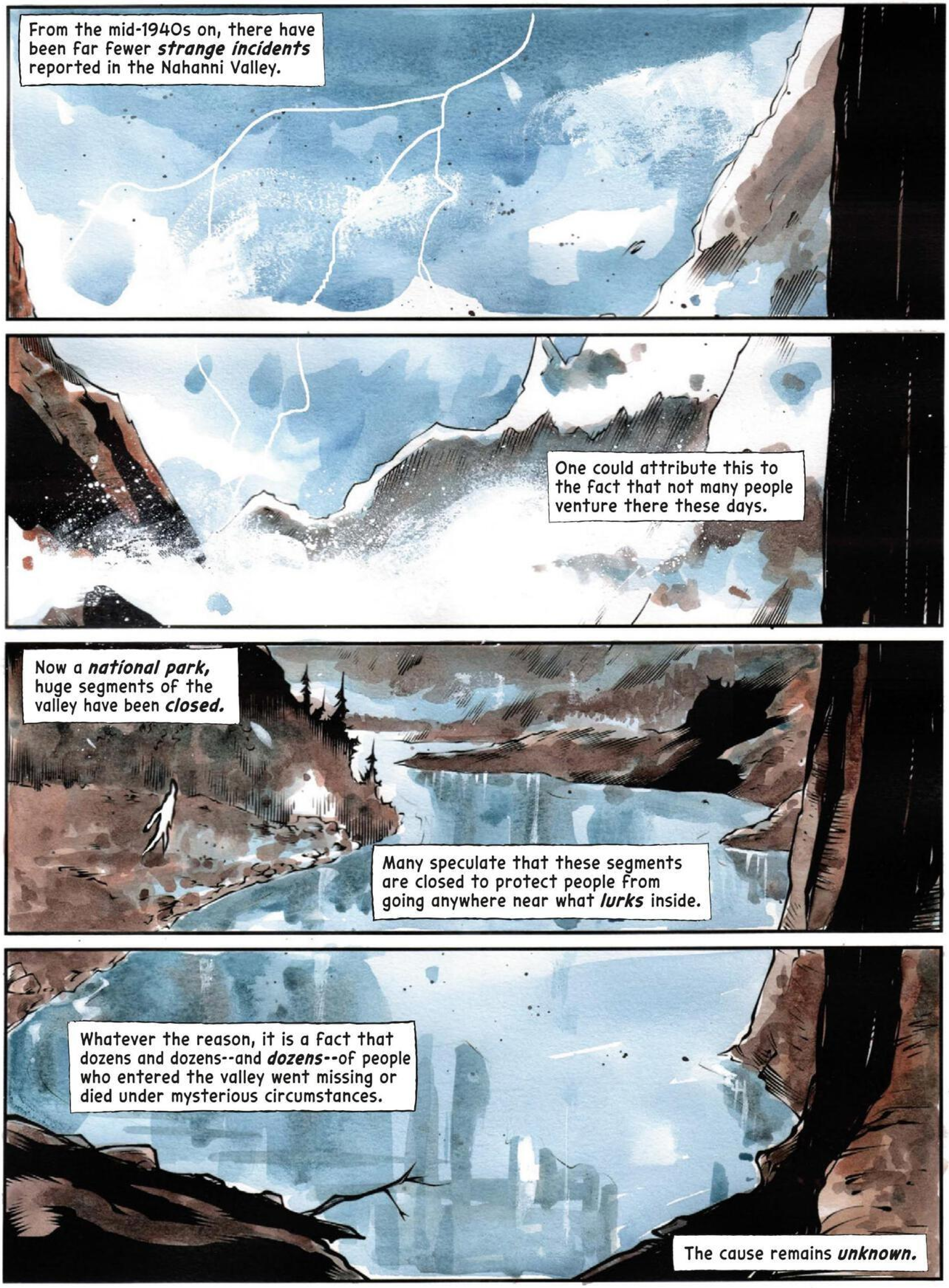

1926
A group is hunting along the Flat River inside the Nahanni Valley.
One of the hunters is a young woman named *Annie Laferte.*
The hunters share an evening of laughter and jokes around the campfire.
The next morning, Annie is *gone.*
The hunters search for her all day...
...then go to the police, who conduct a *massive search* of their own.
But Annie is never found.


Months later, an outdoorsman named *Charley* overhears some men talking about Annie's mysterious disappearance.
Charley goes to the police.
He tells them his story.
He was camped in the Nahanni Valley, near Annie's hunting party, on the night she went missing.
On that same night, he was awakened by the sound of small rocks falling into the Flat River.
SPLISH
SPLISH

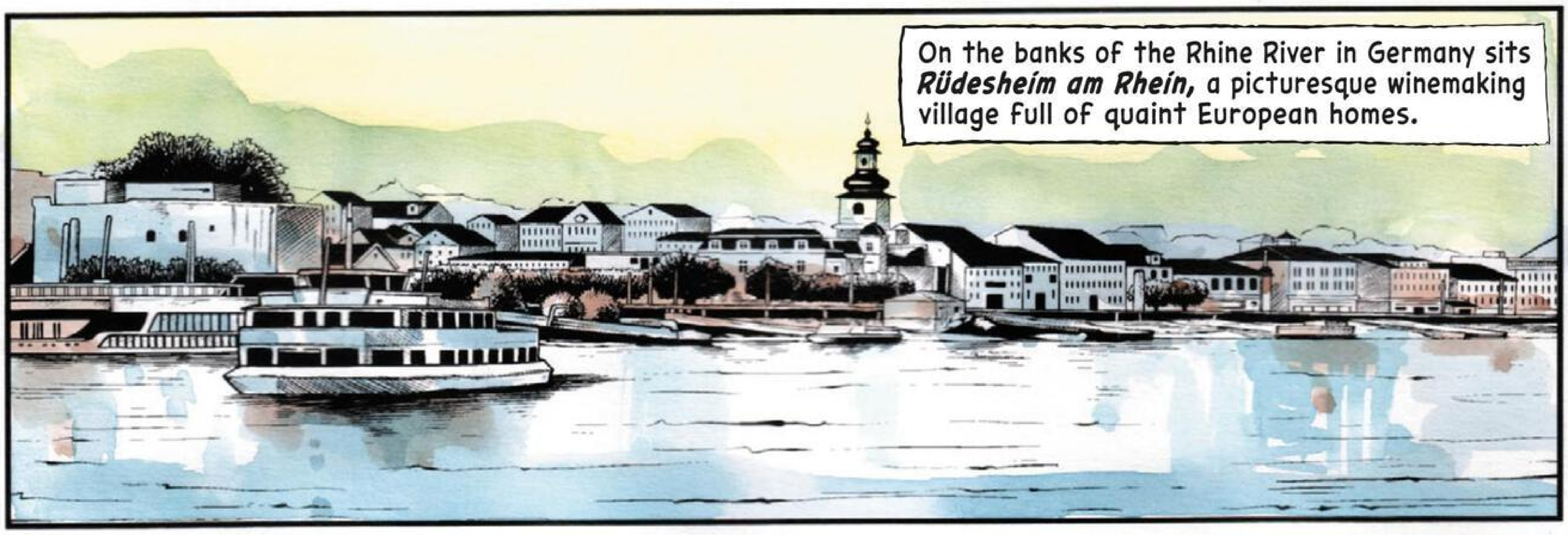

Tracking the sound, he saw in the moonlight across the river...
...a woman matching Annie's description, ***naked*** and running on ***all fours.***
Rocks tumbled down where her hands and feet clawed at the ground.
Charley later said he was ***taken aback*** by the look of her face.
That there was something ***wrong*** with it.
As though she was ***possessed.***

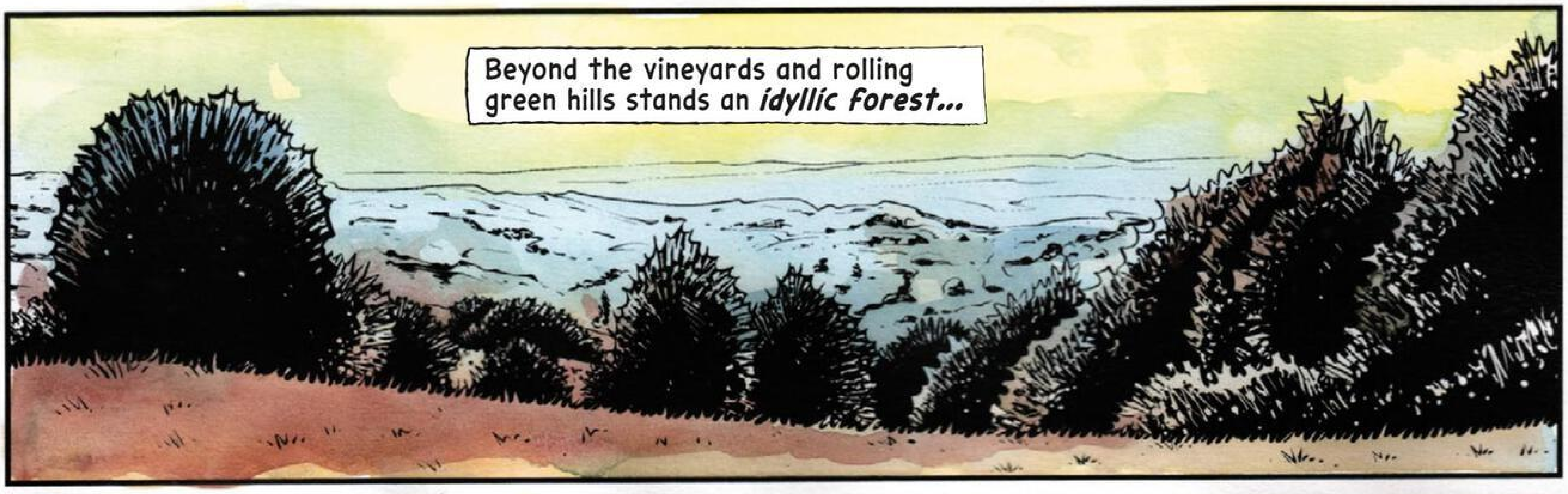
1931
A gold prospector named **Phil Powers** enters the Nahanni Valley.
His skeleton is later found inside his cabin, which had burned down around him.
1945
Ernest Savard tries his luck at claiming the Nahanni Valley's gold.
His corpse is later discovered still inside his sleeping bag, the head missing.
One night, a group of native tribespeople arrive at the search party's camp.
They warn the searchers about ***white figures*** walking through the forest.

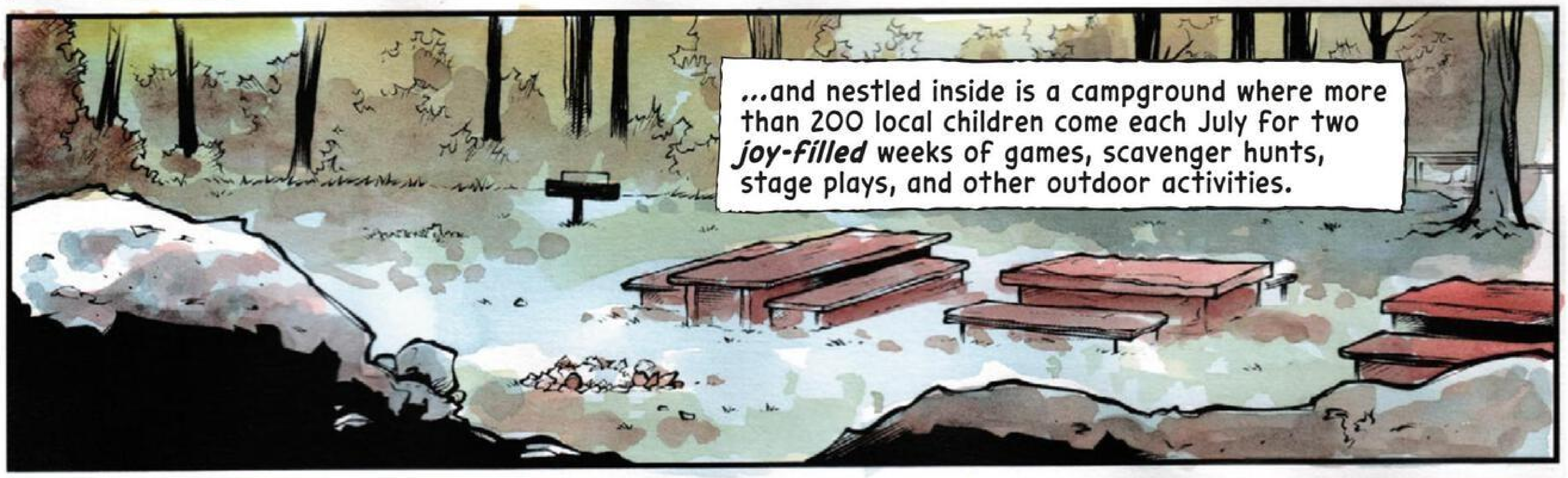
1936
William Epler and Joseph Mulholland-- two more gold prospectors-- journey into the valley.
When they don't return, searchers discover their cabin also burned to the ground.
William and Joseph are never found.
1946
John Patterson, yet another gold prospector, goes missing inside the valley.
A search party is sent to find him.
All night, the searchers hear distant howls and screams.
The leader would later say that the entire valley was sinister...
...and the constant wailing he would never forget.

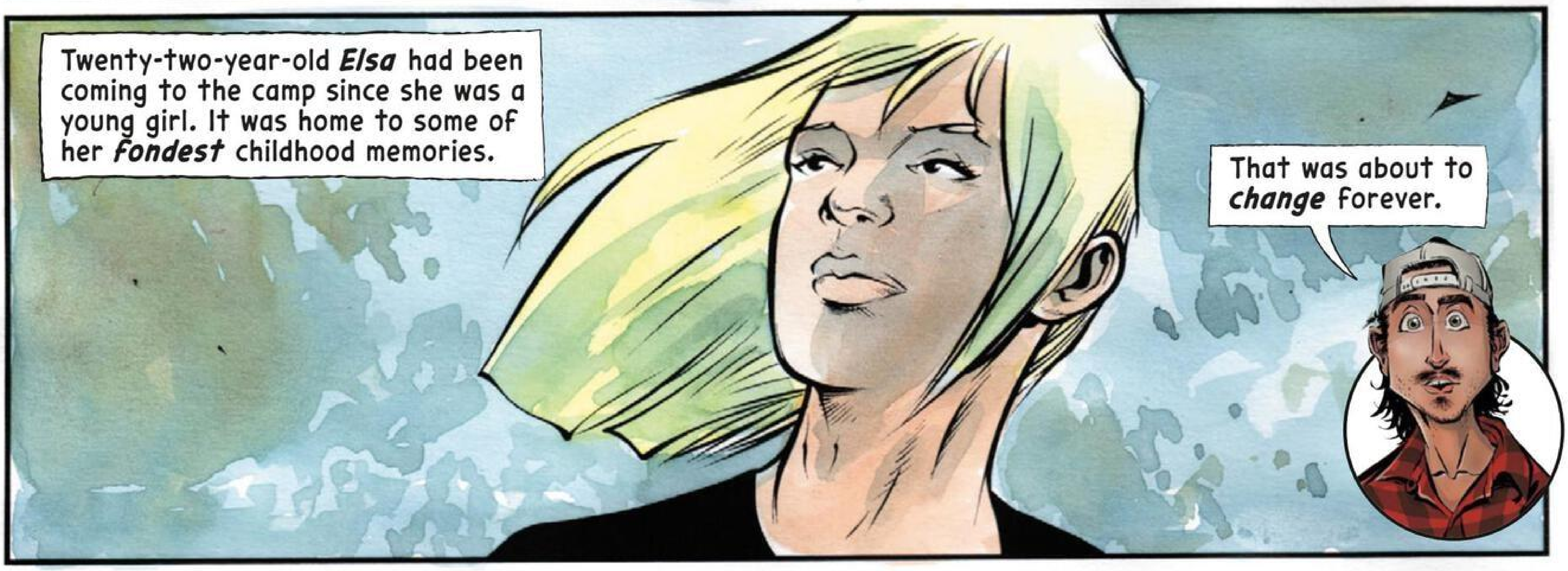

From the mid-1940s on, there have been far fewer ***strange incidents*** reported in the Nahanni Valley.
One could attribute this to the fact that not many people venture there these days.
Now a ***national park,*** huge segments of the valley have been ***closed.***
Many speculate that these segments are closed to protect people from going anywhere near what ***lurks*** inside.
Whatever the reason, it is a fact that dozens and dozens--and ***dozens***--of people who entered the valley went missing or died under mysterious circumstances.
The cause remains ***unknown.***

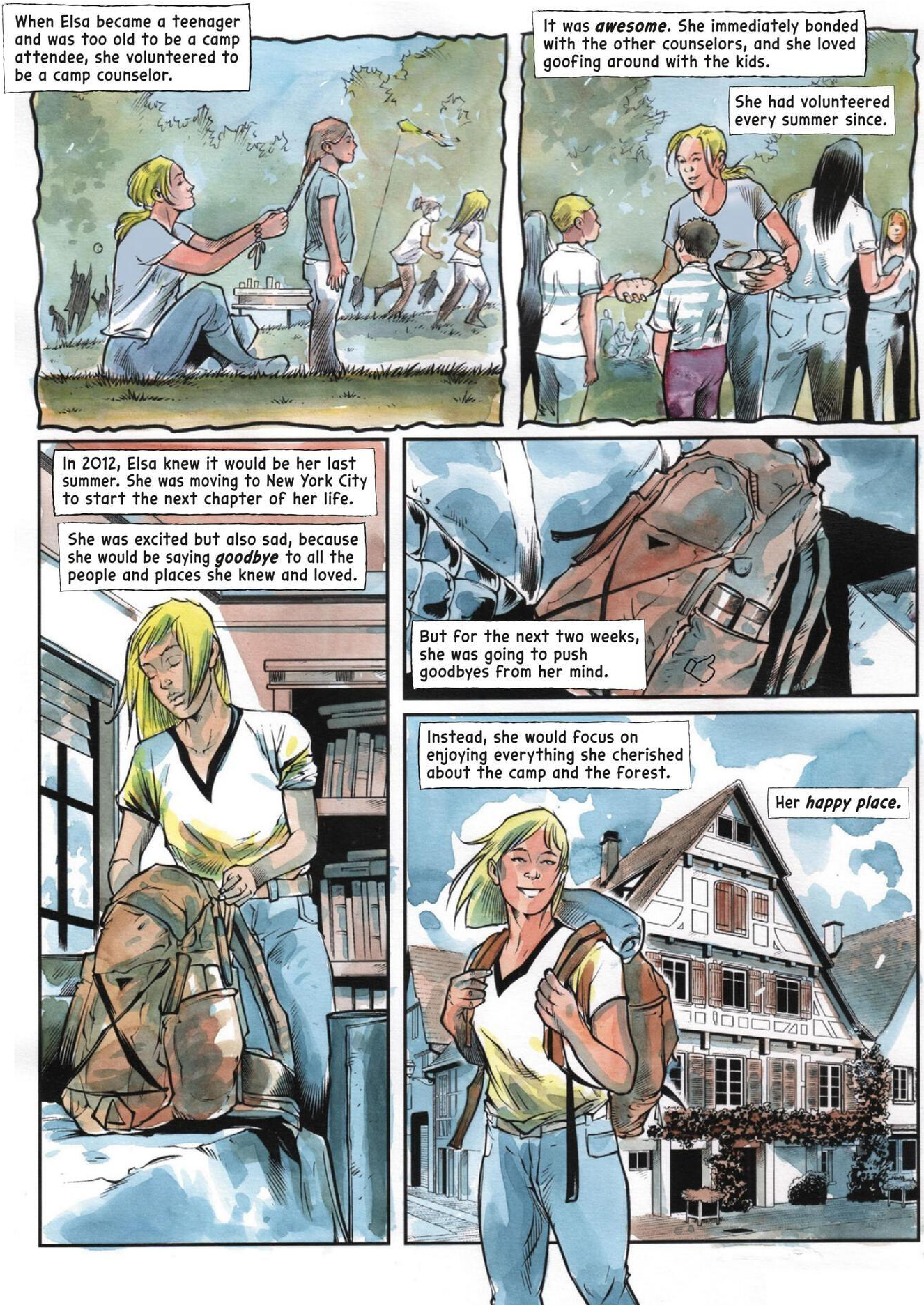
THORNS

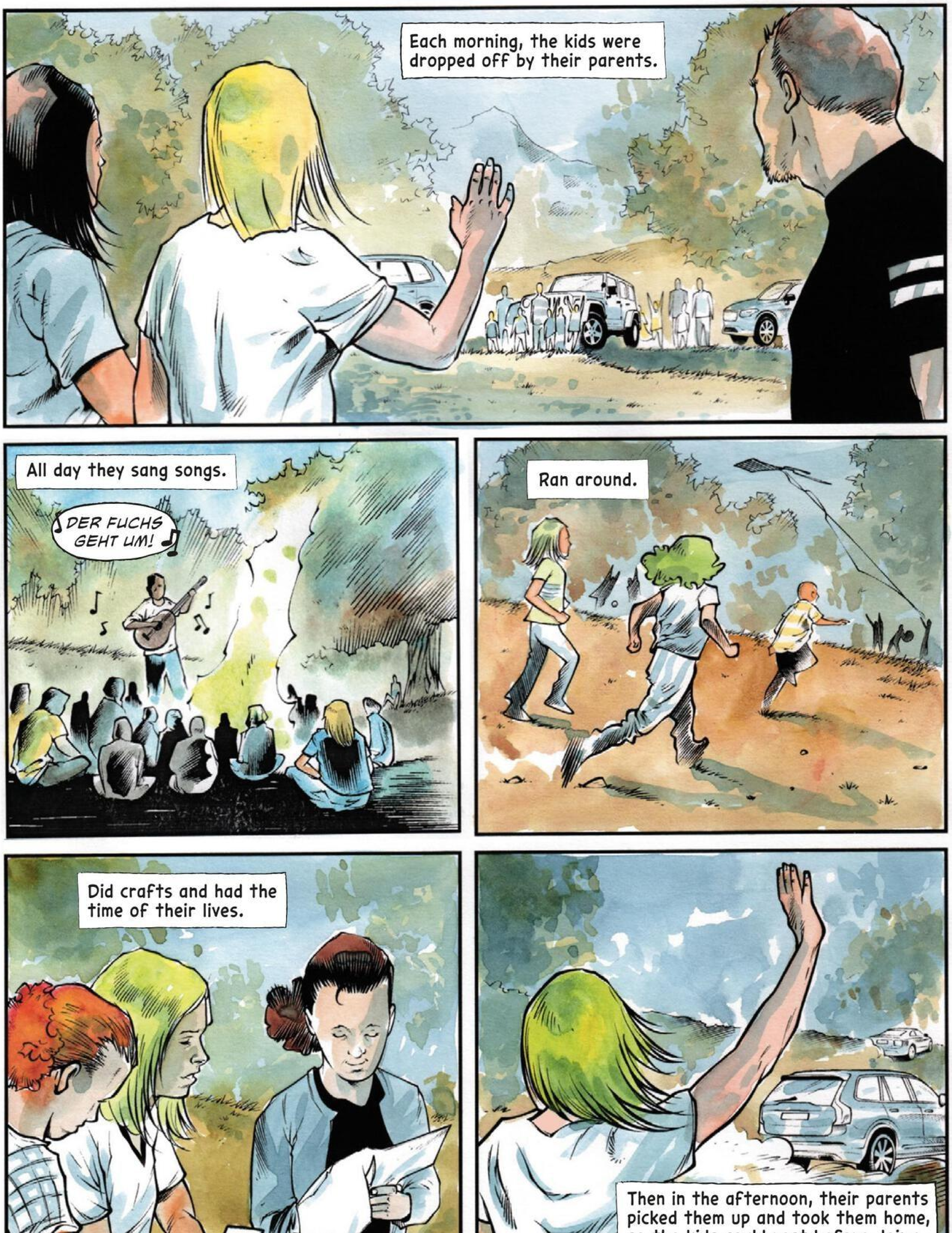

On the banks of the Rhine River in Germany sits ***Rüdesheim am Rhein,*** a picturesque winemaking village full of quaint European homes.

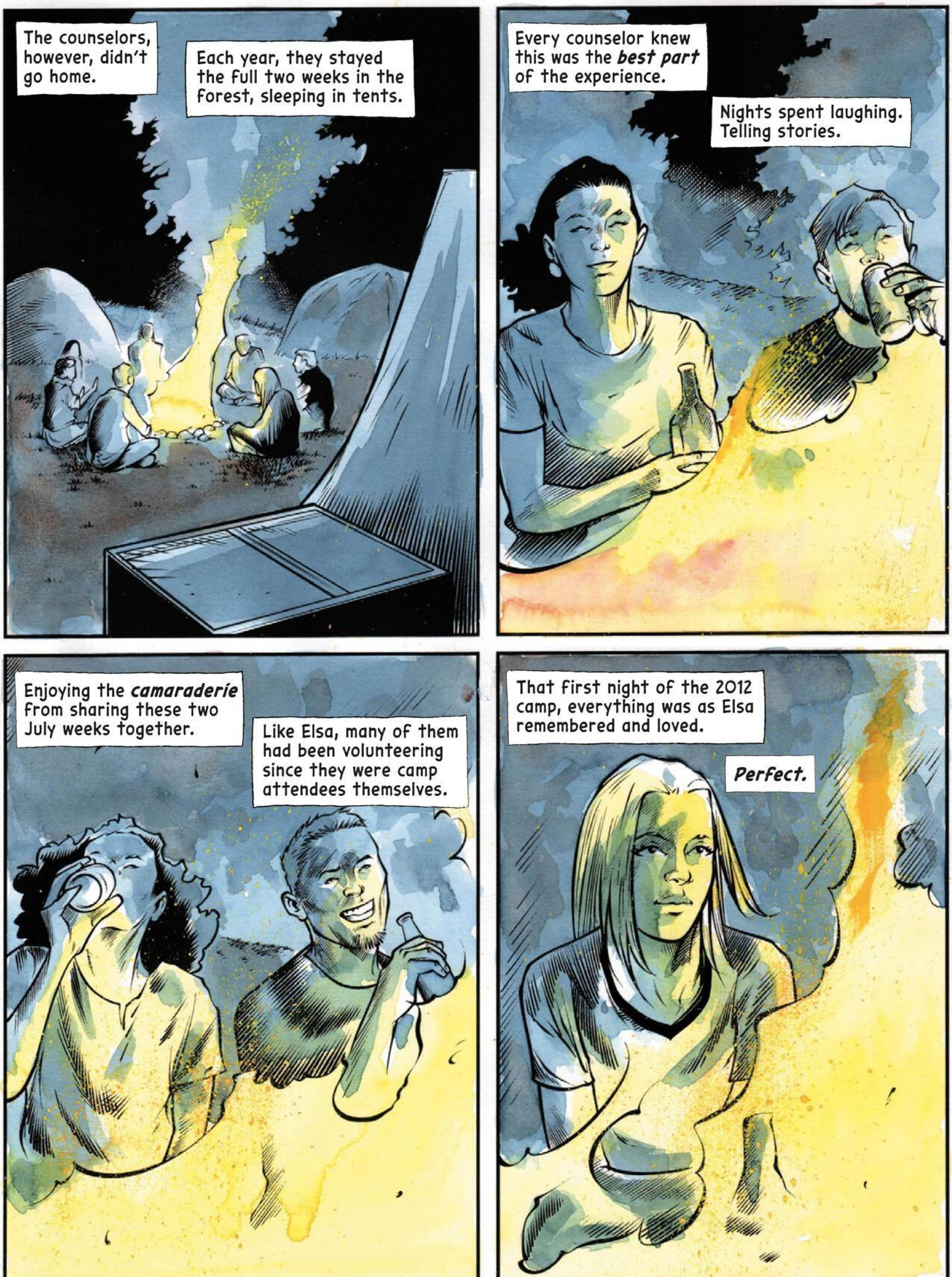

Beyond the vineyards and rolling green hills stands an *idyllic forest...*

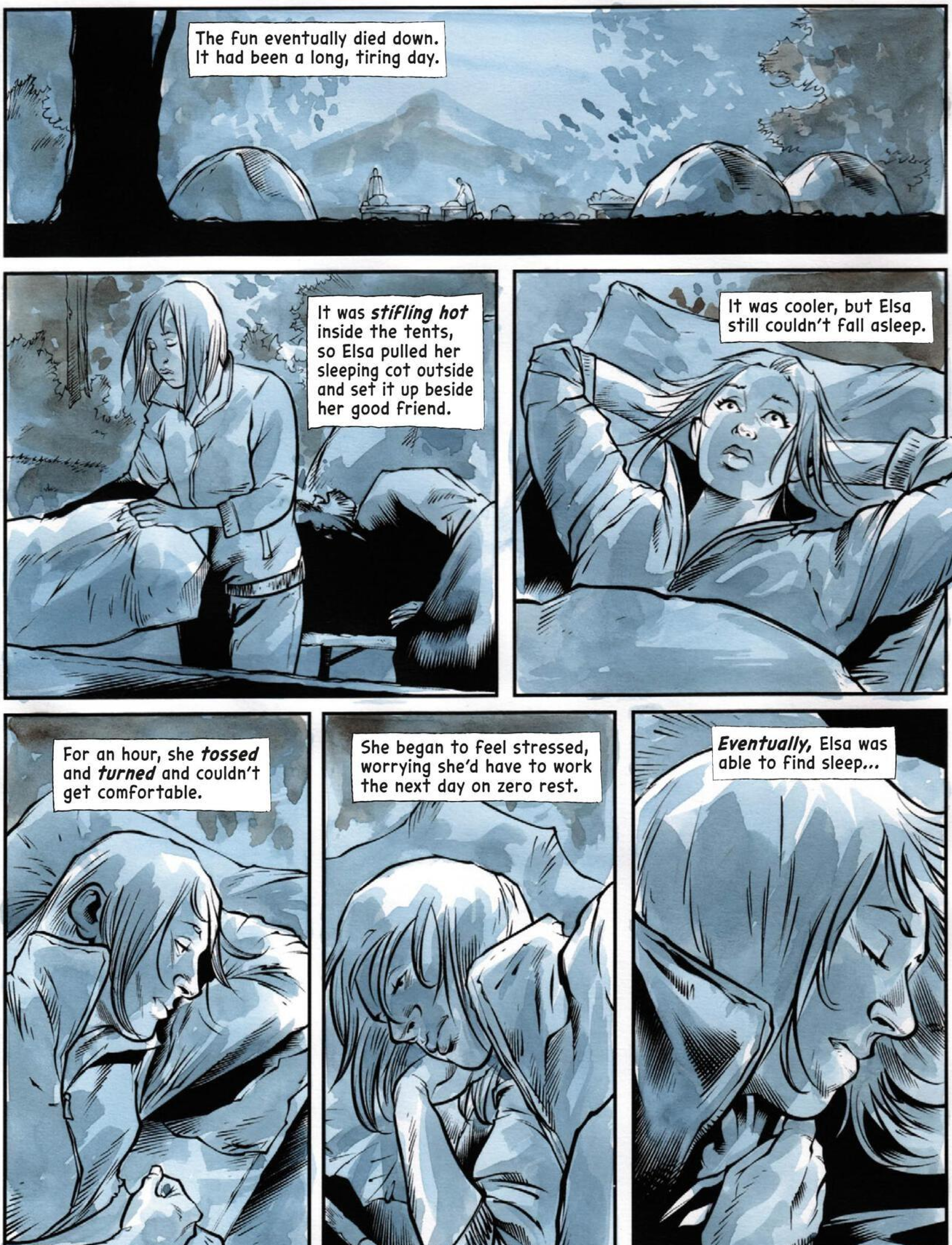

...and nestled inside is a campground where more than 200 local children come each July for two ***joy-filled*** weeks of games, scavenger hunts, stage plays, and other outdoor activities.

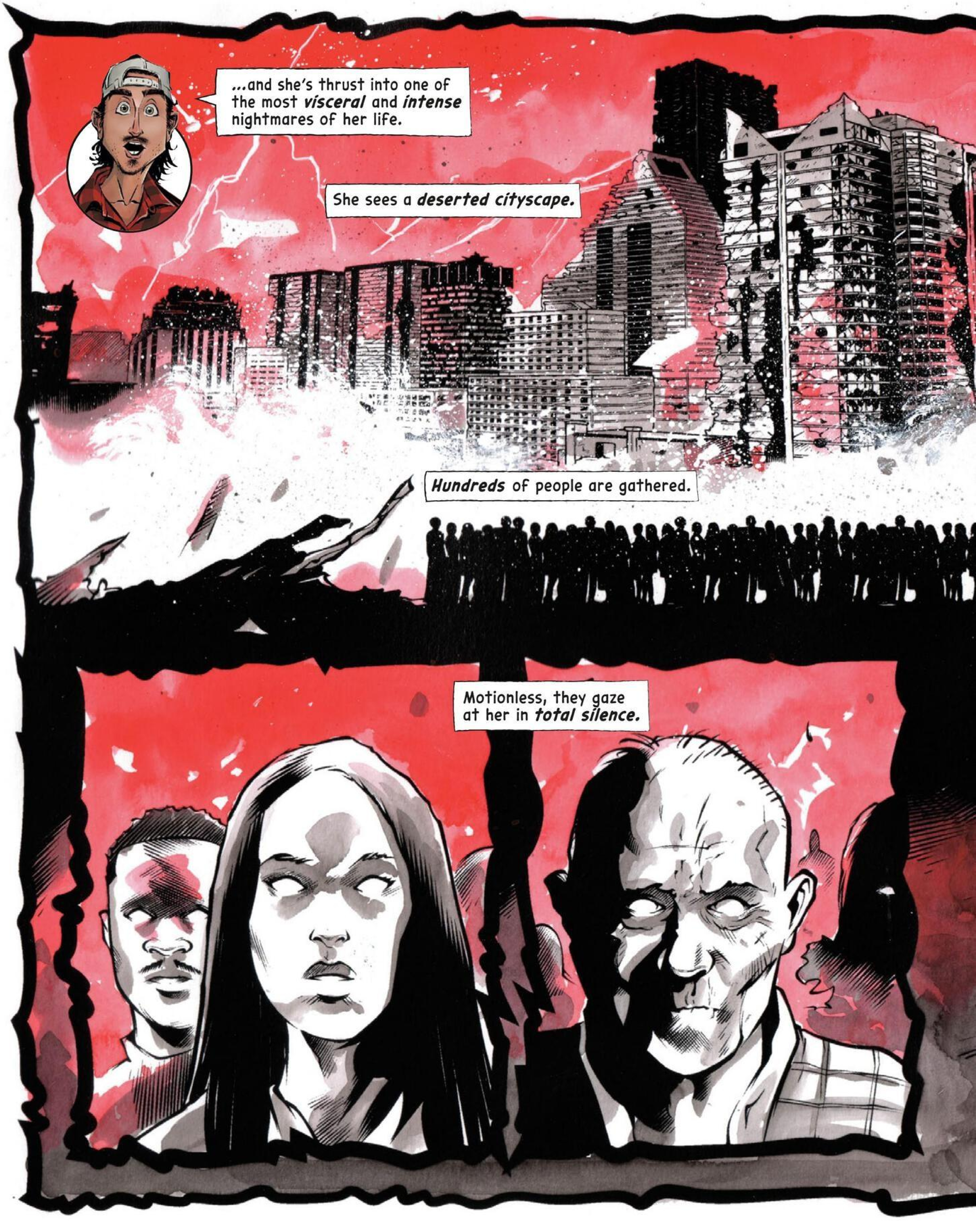

Twenty-two-year-old ***Elsa*** had been coming to the camp since she was a young girl. It was home to some of her ***fondest*** childhood memories.
That was about to ***change*** forever.

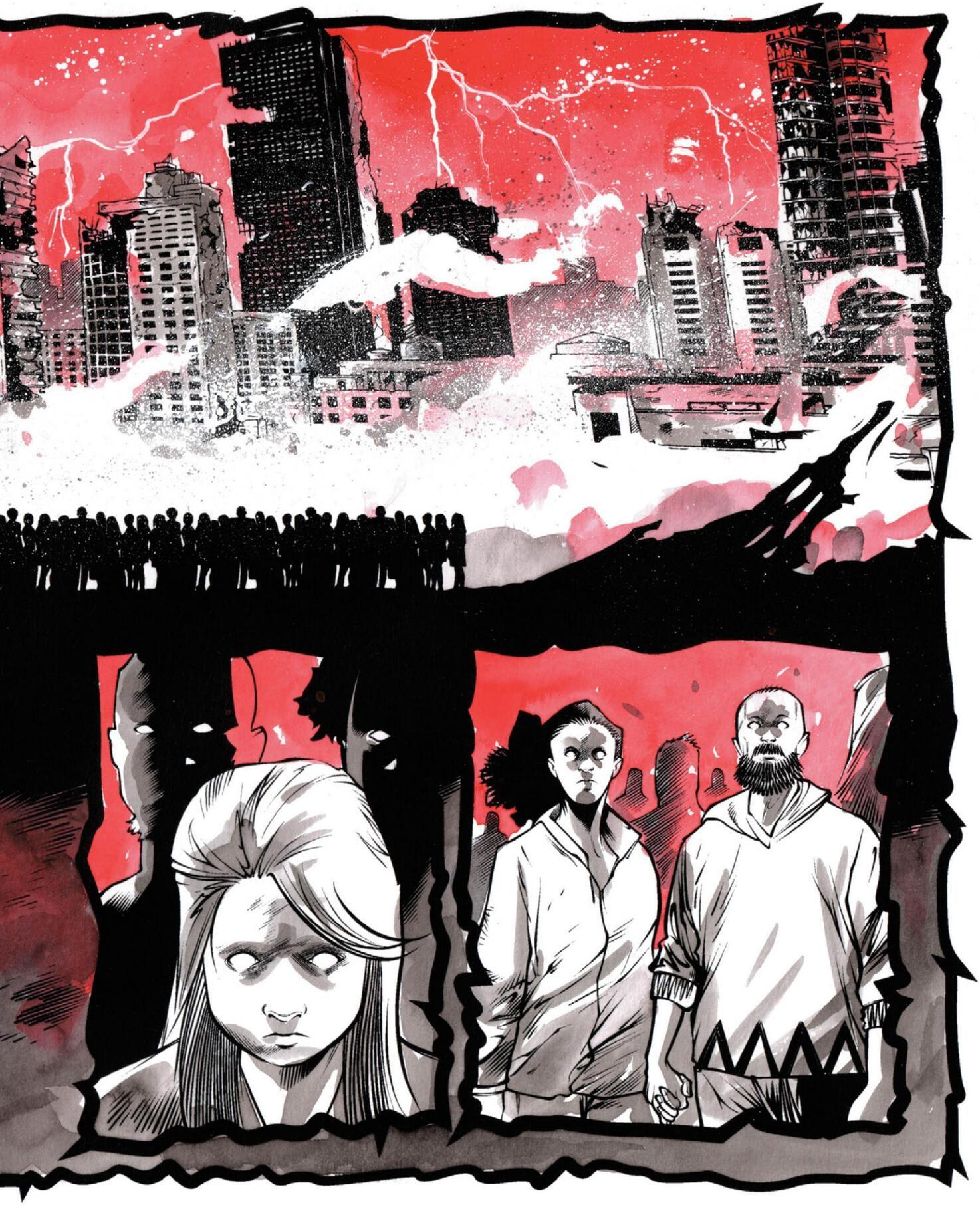

When Elsa became a teenager and was too old to be a camp attendee, she volunteered to be a camp counselor.
It was *awesome*. She immediately bonded with the other counselors, and she loved goofing around with the kids.
She had volunteered every summer since.
In 2012, Elsa knew it would be her last summer. She was moving to New York City to start the next chapter of her life.
She was excited but also sad, because she would be saying *goodbye* to all the people and places she knew and loved.
But for the next two weeks, she was going to push goodbyes from her mind.
Instead, she would focus on enjoying everything she cherished about the camp and the forest.
Her *happy place.*

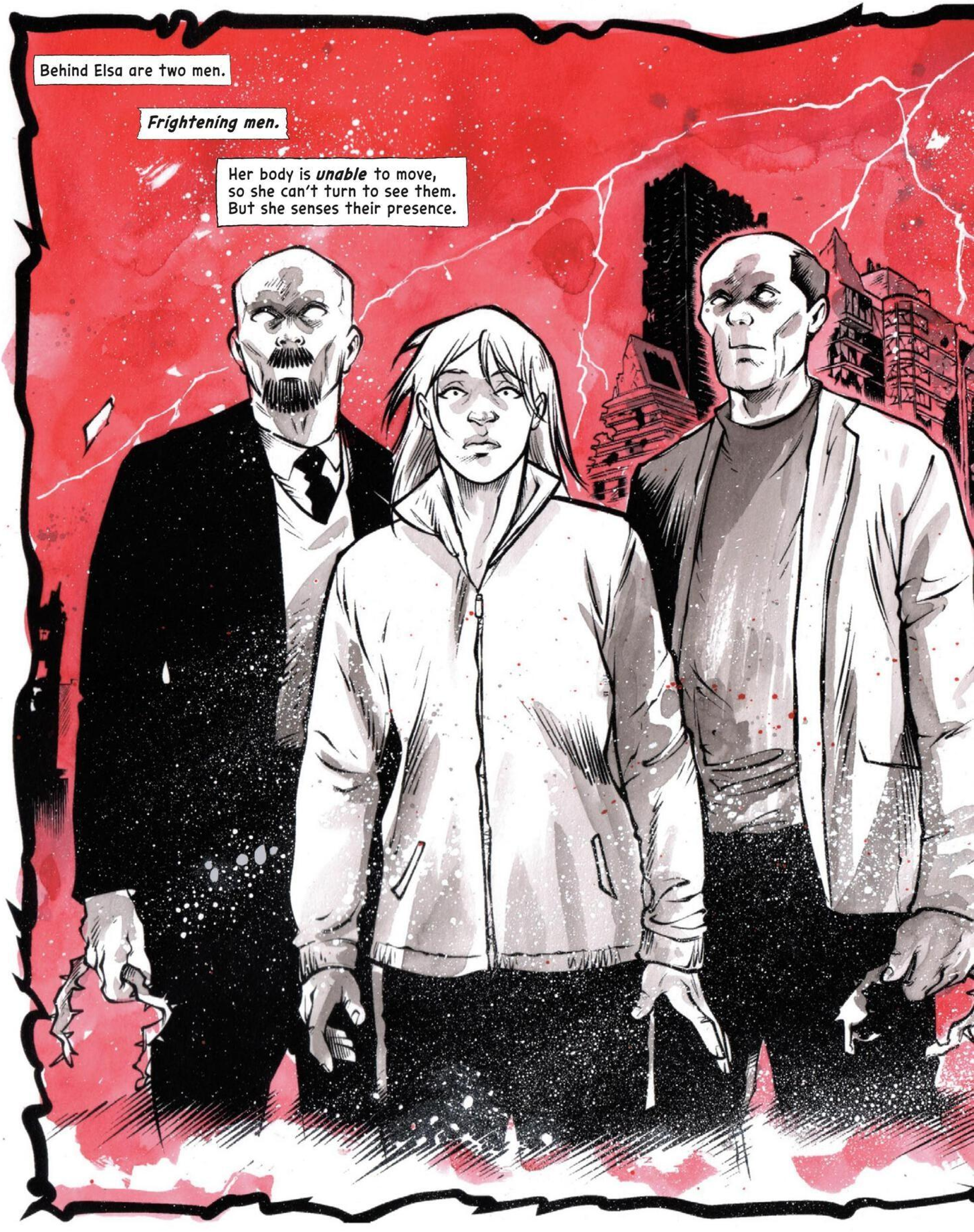

Each morning, the kids were dropped off by their parents.
All day they sang songs.
DER FUCHS GEHT UM!
Ran around.
Did crafts and had the time of their lives.
Then in the afternoon, their parents picked them up and took them home, so the kids could rest before doing it *all again* the next day.

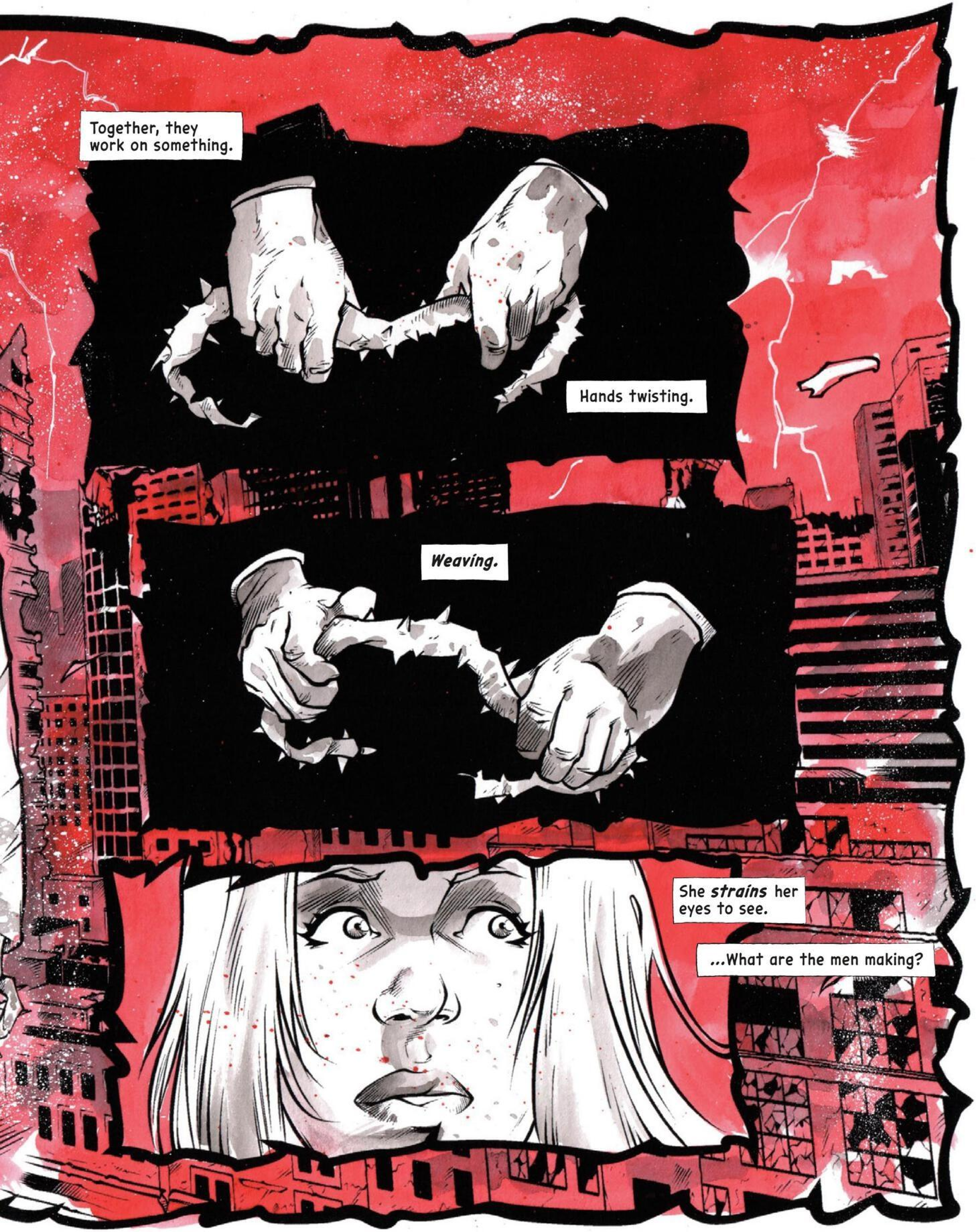

The counselors, however, didn't go home.
Each year, they stayed the full two weeks in the forest, sleeping in tents.
Every counselor knew this was the ***best part*** of the experience.
Nights spent laughing. Telling stories.
Enjoying the ***camaraderie*** from sharing these two July weeks together.
Like Elsa, many of them had been volunteering since they were camp attendees themselves.
That first night of the 2012 camp, everything was as Elsa remembered and loved.
Perfect.

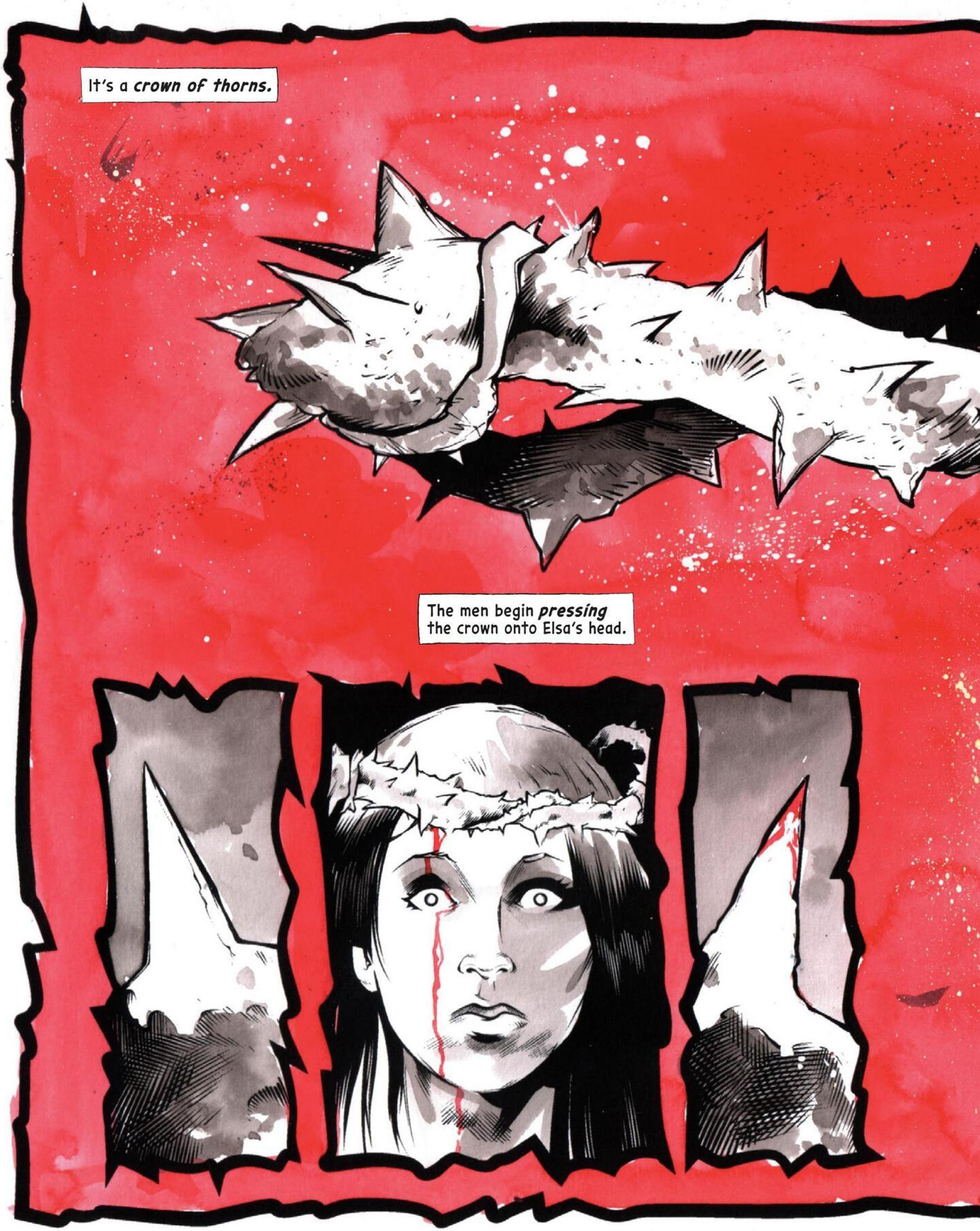

The fun eventually died down. It had been a long, tiring day.
It was *stifling hot* inside the tents, so Elsa pulled her sleeping cot outside and set it up beside her good friend.
It was cooler, but Elsa still couldn't fall asleep.
For an hour, she *tossed* and *turned* and couldn't get comfortable.
She began to feel stressed, worrying she'd have to work the next day on zero rest.
Eventually, Elsa was able to find sleep...

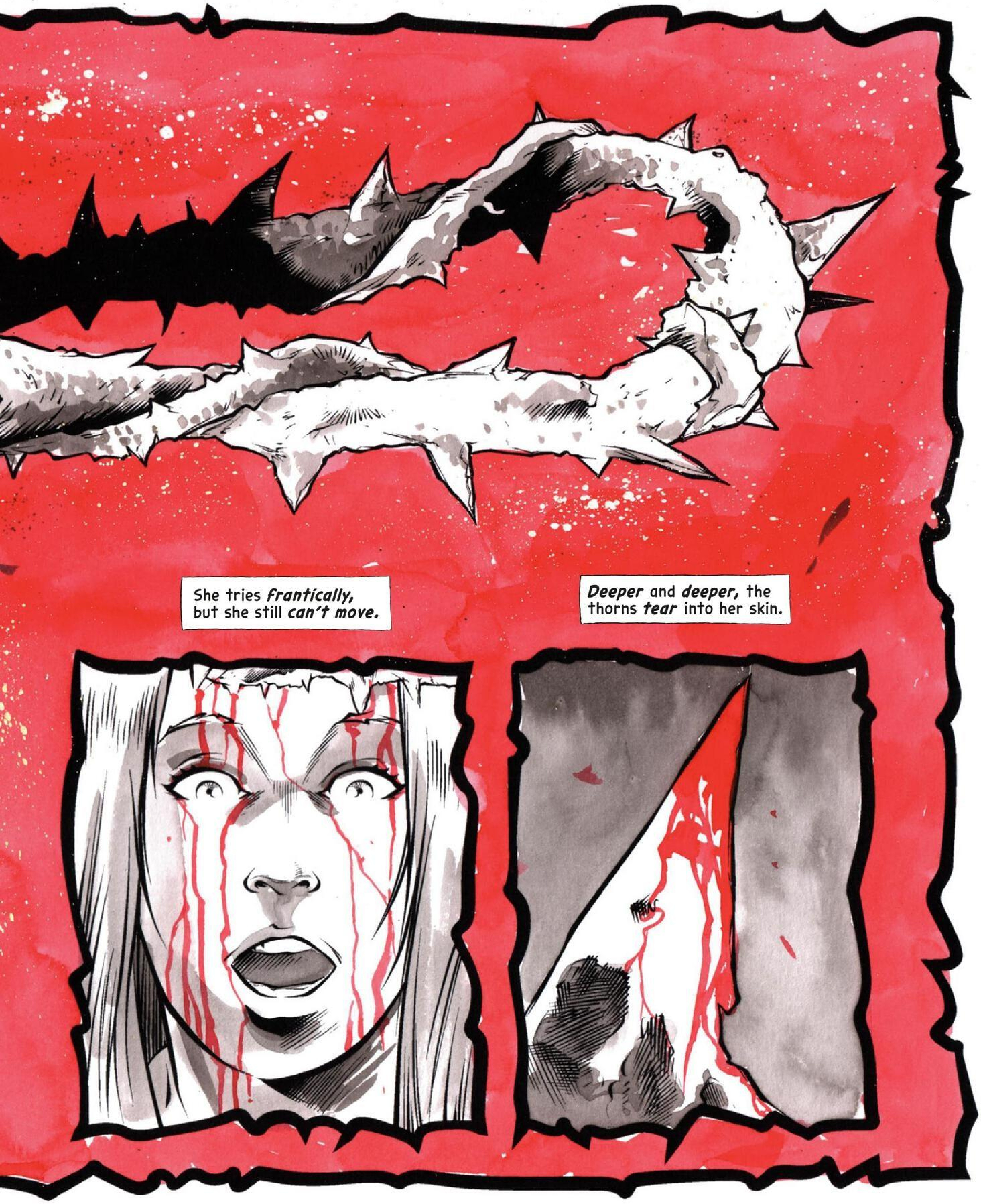

...and she's thrust into one of the most *visceral* and *intense* nightmares of her life.
She sees a *deserted cityscape.*
Hundreds of people are gathered.
Motionless, they gaze at her in *total silence.*

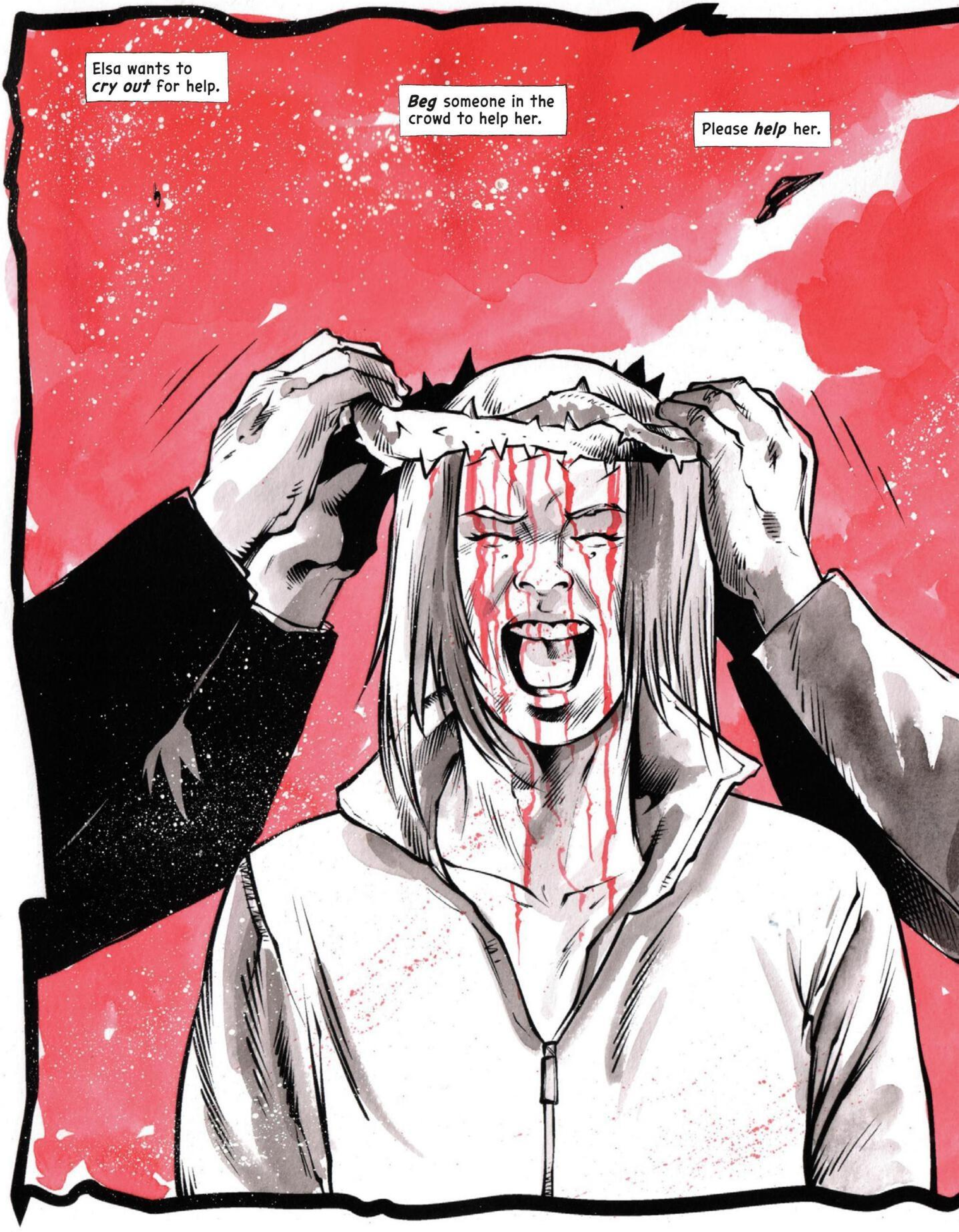


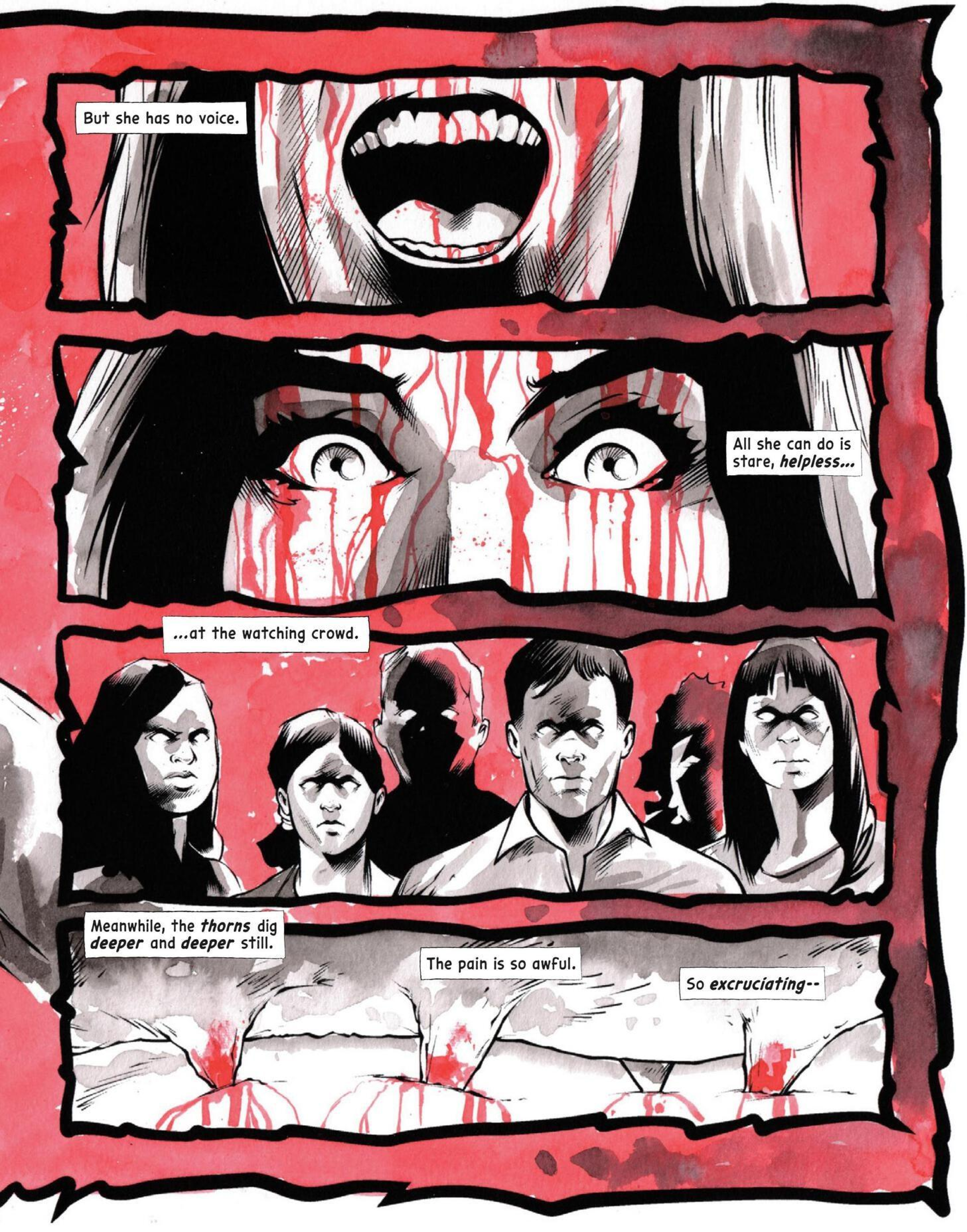

Behind Elsa are two men.
Frightening men.
Her body is ***unable*** to move, so she can't turn to see them. But she senses their presence.

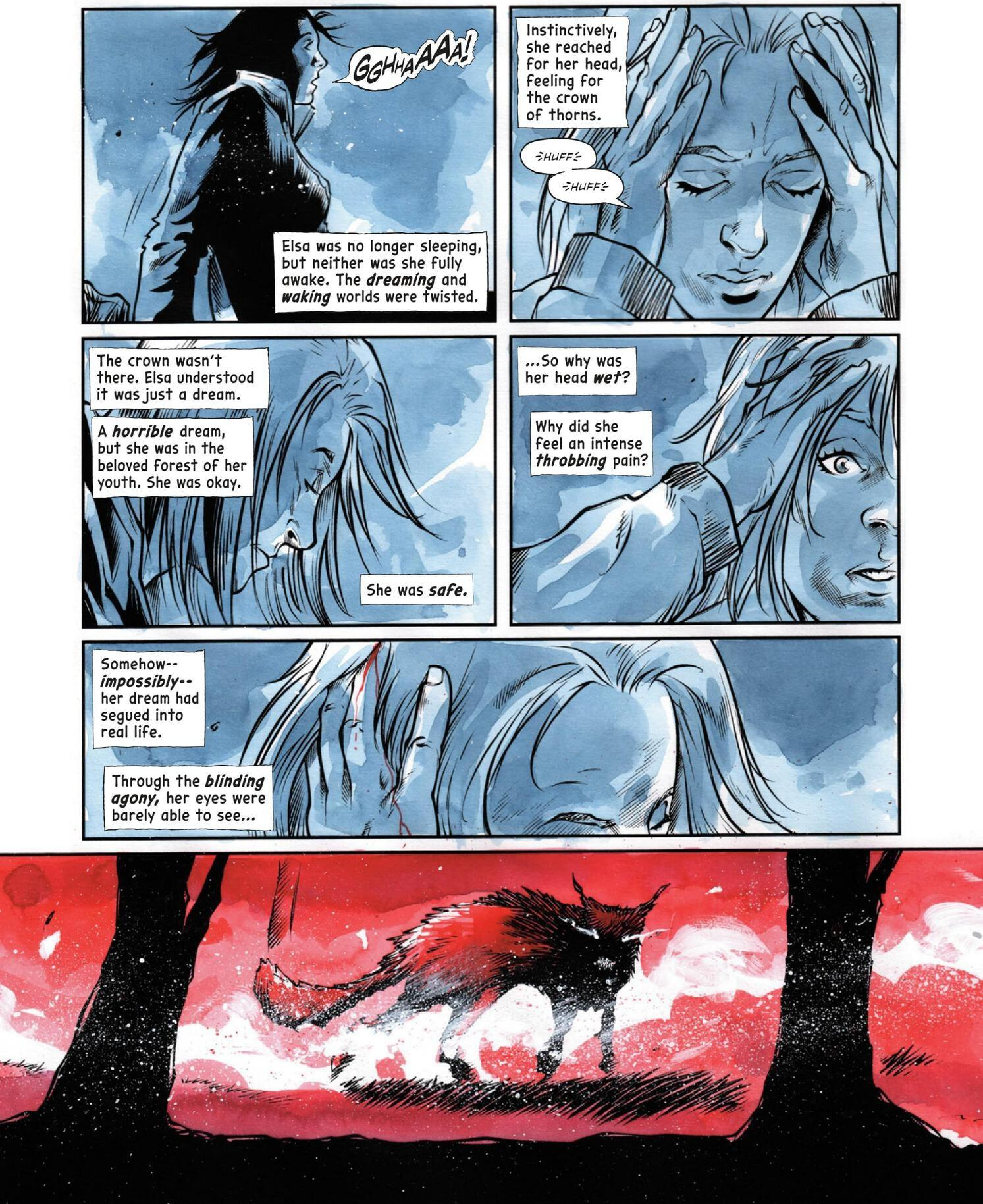

Together, they work on something.
Hands twisting.
Weaving.
She ***strains*** her eyes to see.
...What are the men making?

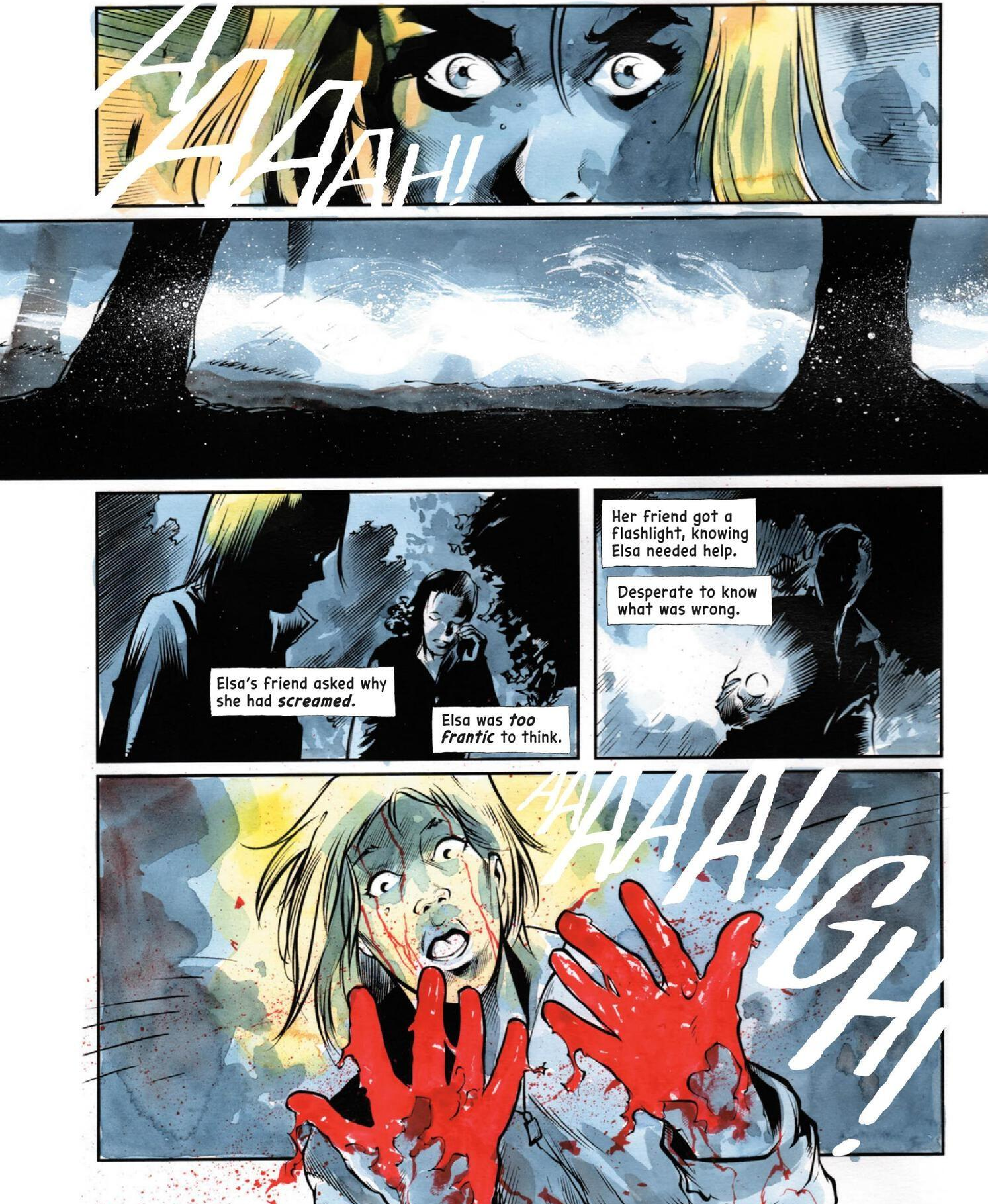

It's a *crown of thorns.*
The men begin *pressing* the crown onto Elsa's head.

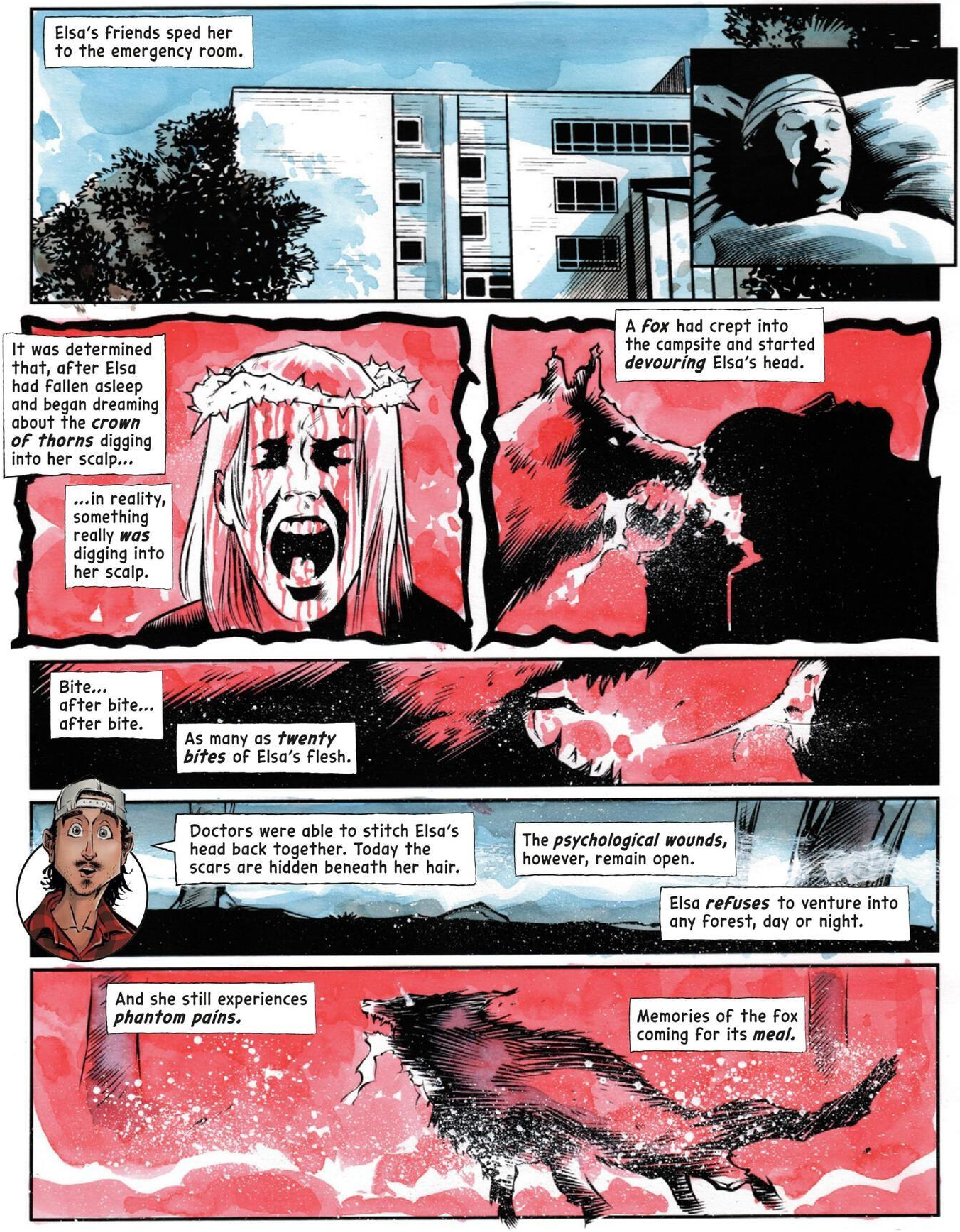

She tries *frantically,* but she still *can't move.*
Deeper and *deeper,* the thorns *tear* into her skin.


Elsa wants to *cry out* for help.
Beg someone in the crowd to help her.
Please *help* her.


But she has no voice.
All she can do is stare, ***helpless...***
...at the watching crowd.
Meanwhile, the ***thorns*** dig ***deeper*** and ***deeper*** still.
The pain is so awful.
So ***excruciating--***

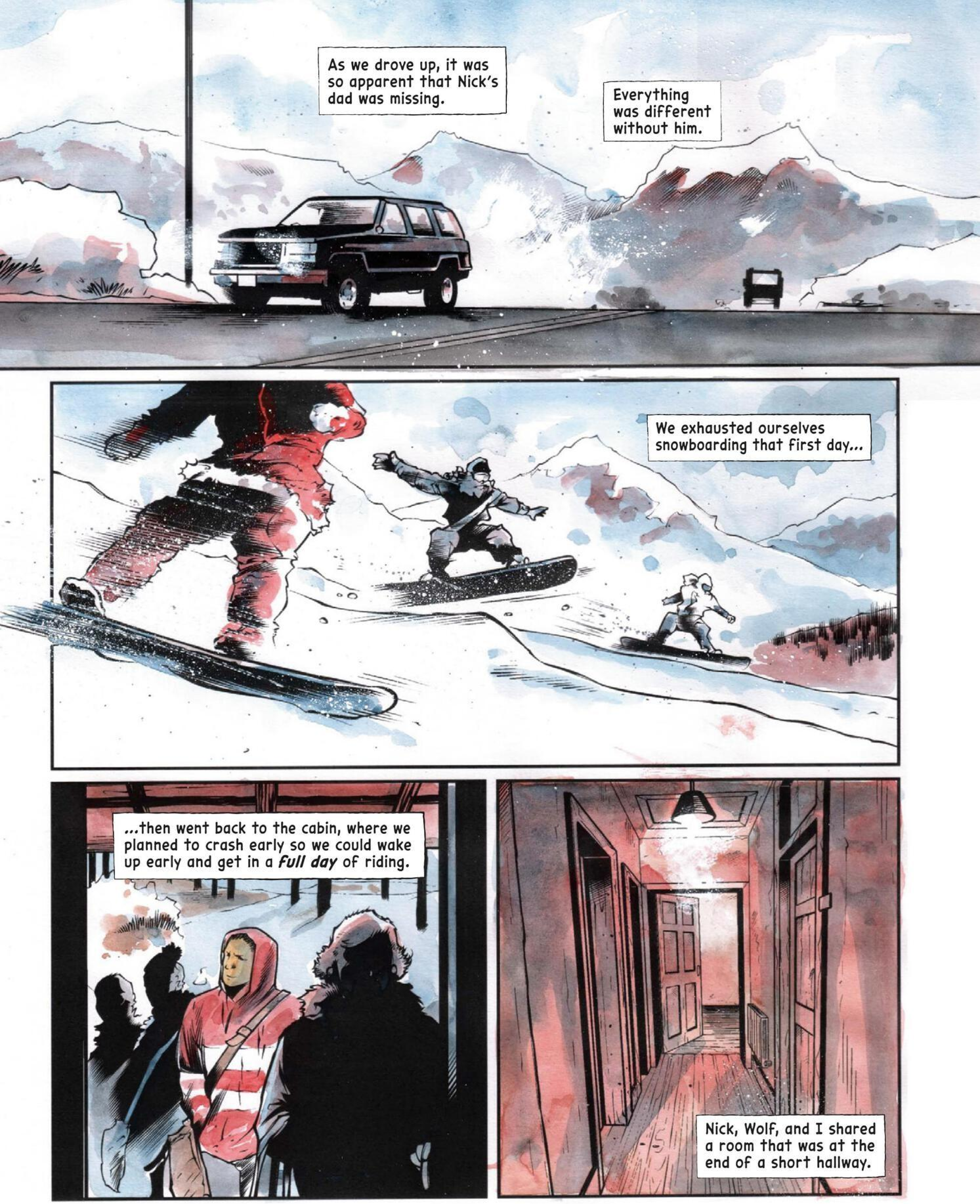

GGHHAAAA!
Elsa was no longer sleeping, but neither was she fully awake. The *dreaming* and *waking* worlds were twisted.
Instinctively, she reached for her head, feeling for the crown of thorns.
HUFF
HUFF
The crown wasn't there. Elsa understood it was just a dream.
A *horrible* dream, but she was in the beloved forest of her youth. She was okay.
She was *safe.*
...So why was her head *wet*?
Why did she feel an intense *throbbing* pain?
Somehow-- *impossibly*-- her dream had segued into real life.
Through the *blinding agony,* her eyes were barely able to see...

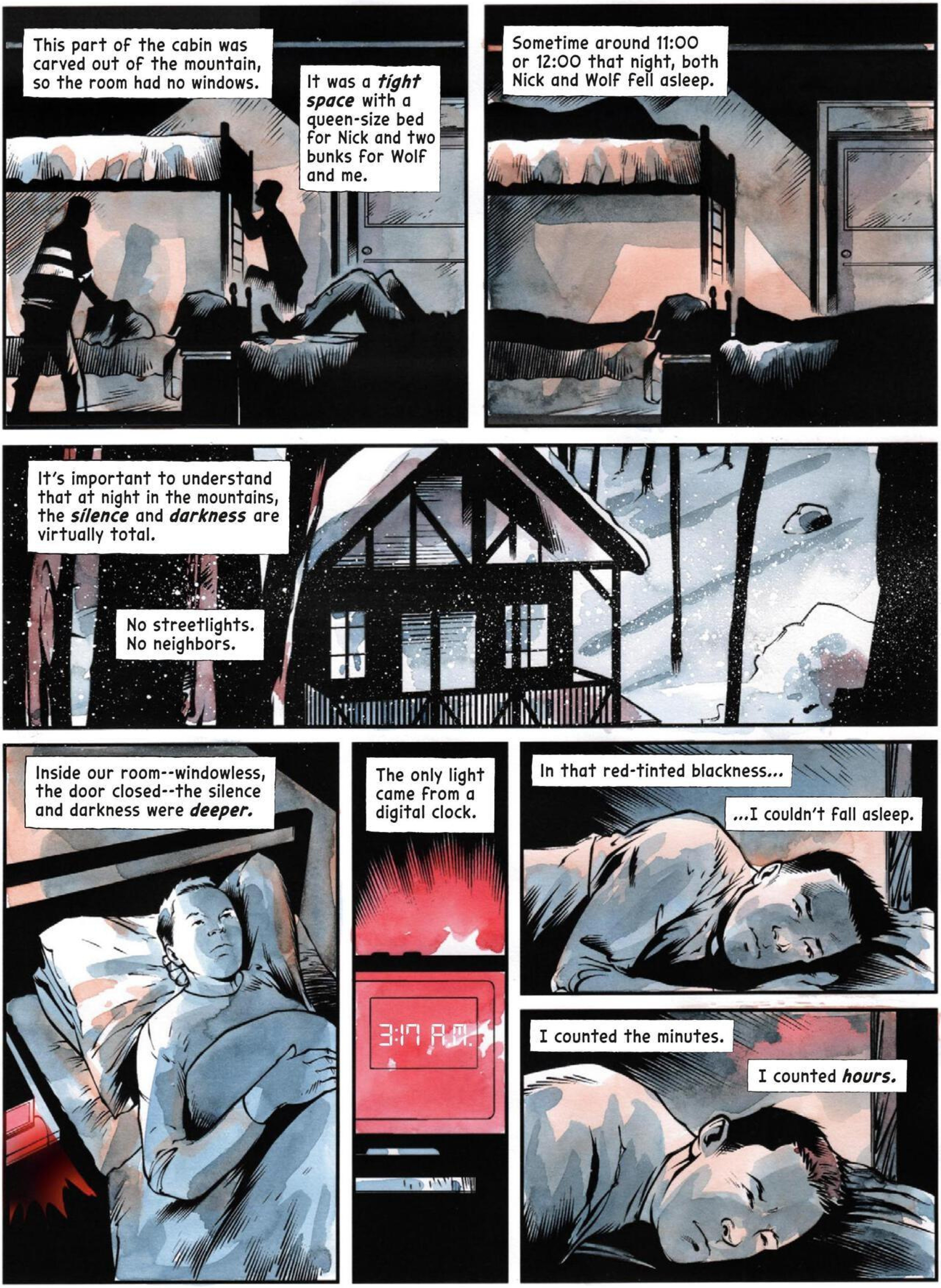

AAAAH!
Elsa's friend asked why she had *screamed.*
Elsa was *too frantic* to think.
Her friend got a flashlight, knowing Elsa needed help.
Desperate to know what was wrong.
AAAAAIGH!

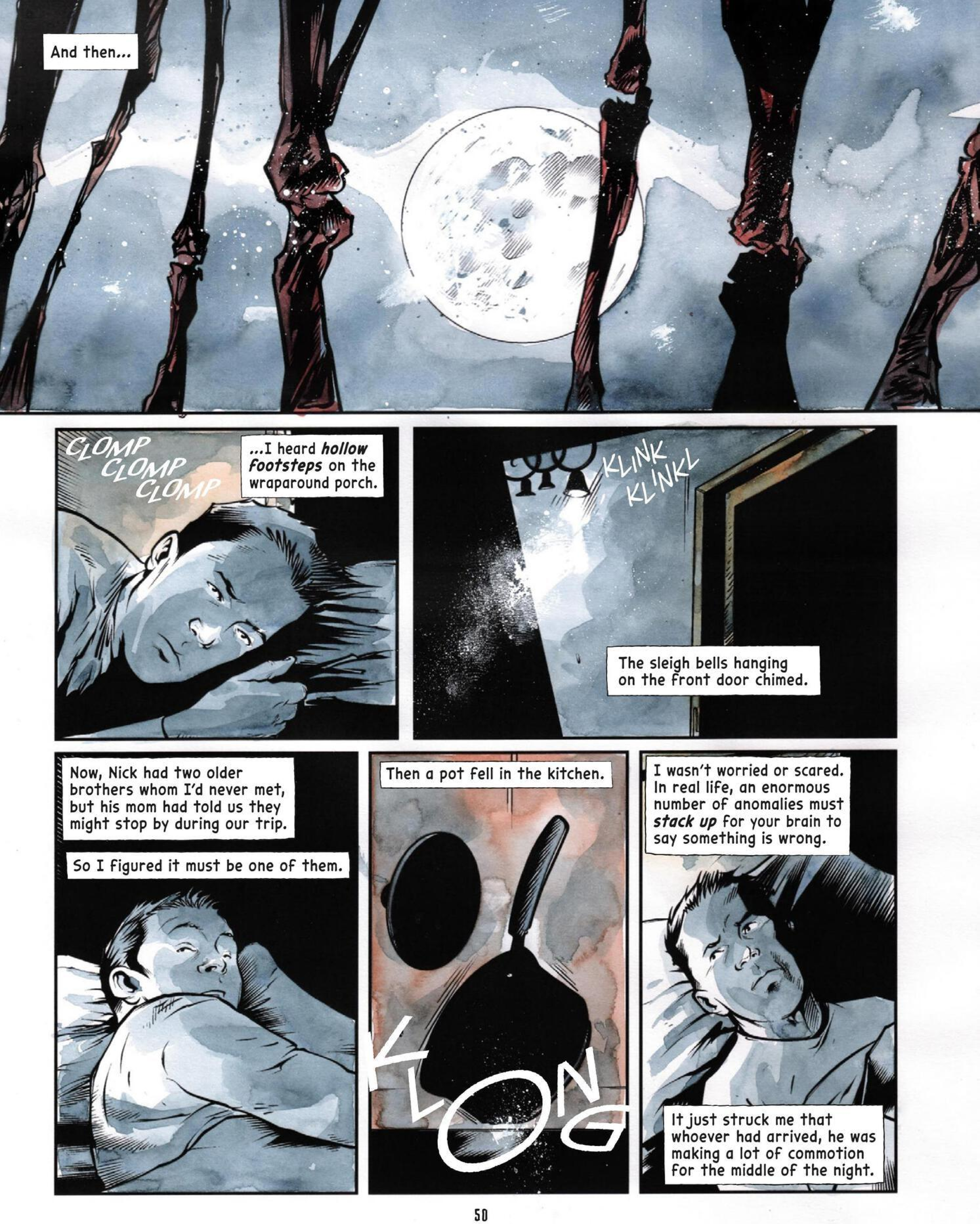

Elsa's friends sped her to the emergency room.
It was determined that, after Elsa had fallen asleep and began dreaming about the ***crown of thorns*** digging into her scalp...
...in reality, something really ***was*** digging into her scalp.
A ***fox*** had crept into the campsite and started ***devouring*** Elsa's head.
Bite... after bite... after bite.
As many as ***twenty bites*** of Elsa's flesh.
Doctors were able to stitch Elsa's head back together. Today the scars are hidden beneath her hair.
The ***psychological wounds,*** however, remain open.
Elsa ***refuses*** to venture into any forest, day or night.
And she still experiences ***phantom pains.***
Memories of the fox coming for its ***meal.***

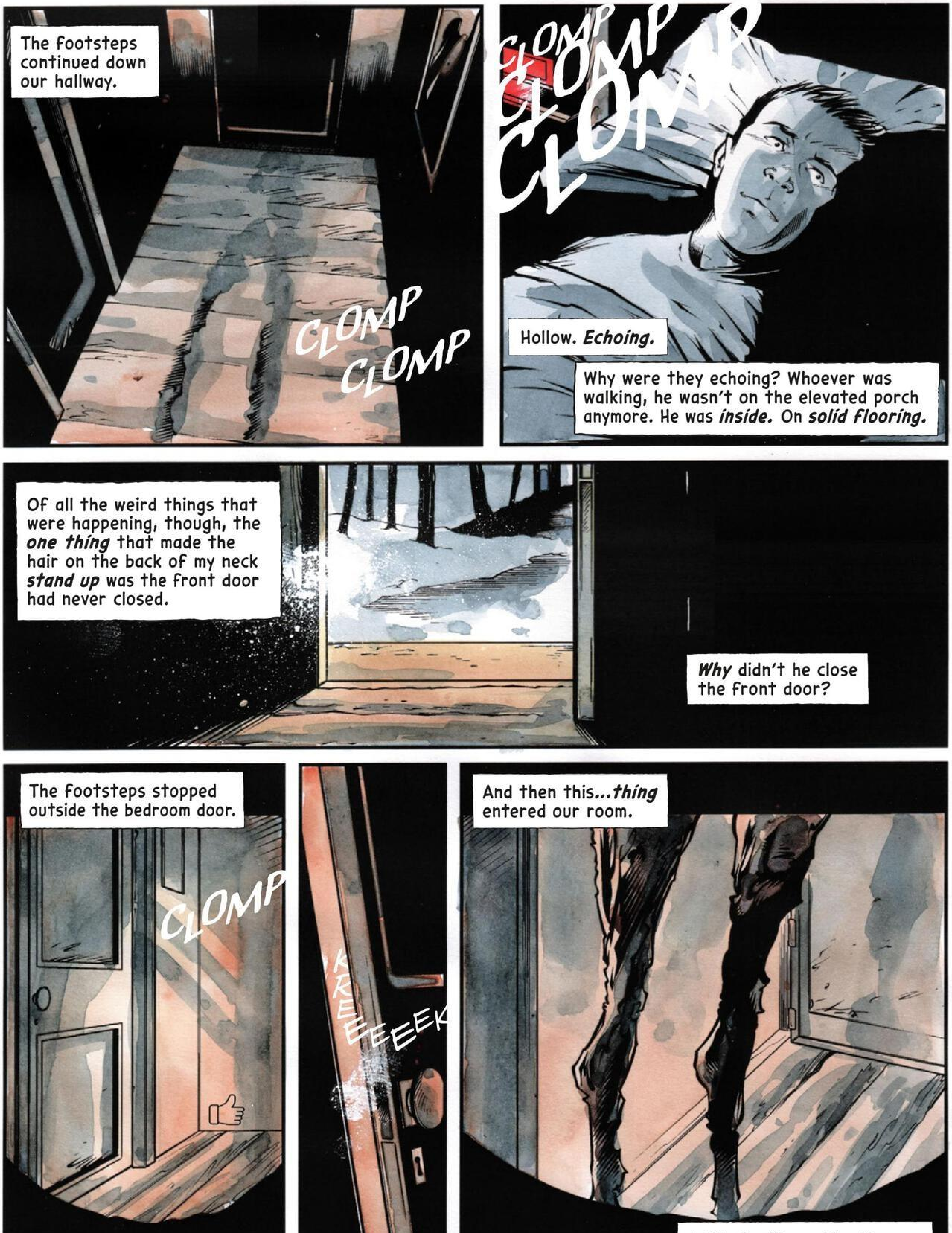
WHAT I SAW IN MY ROOM STILL HAUNTS ME

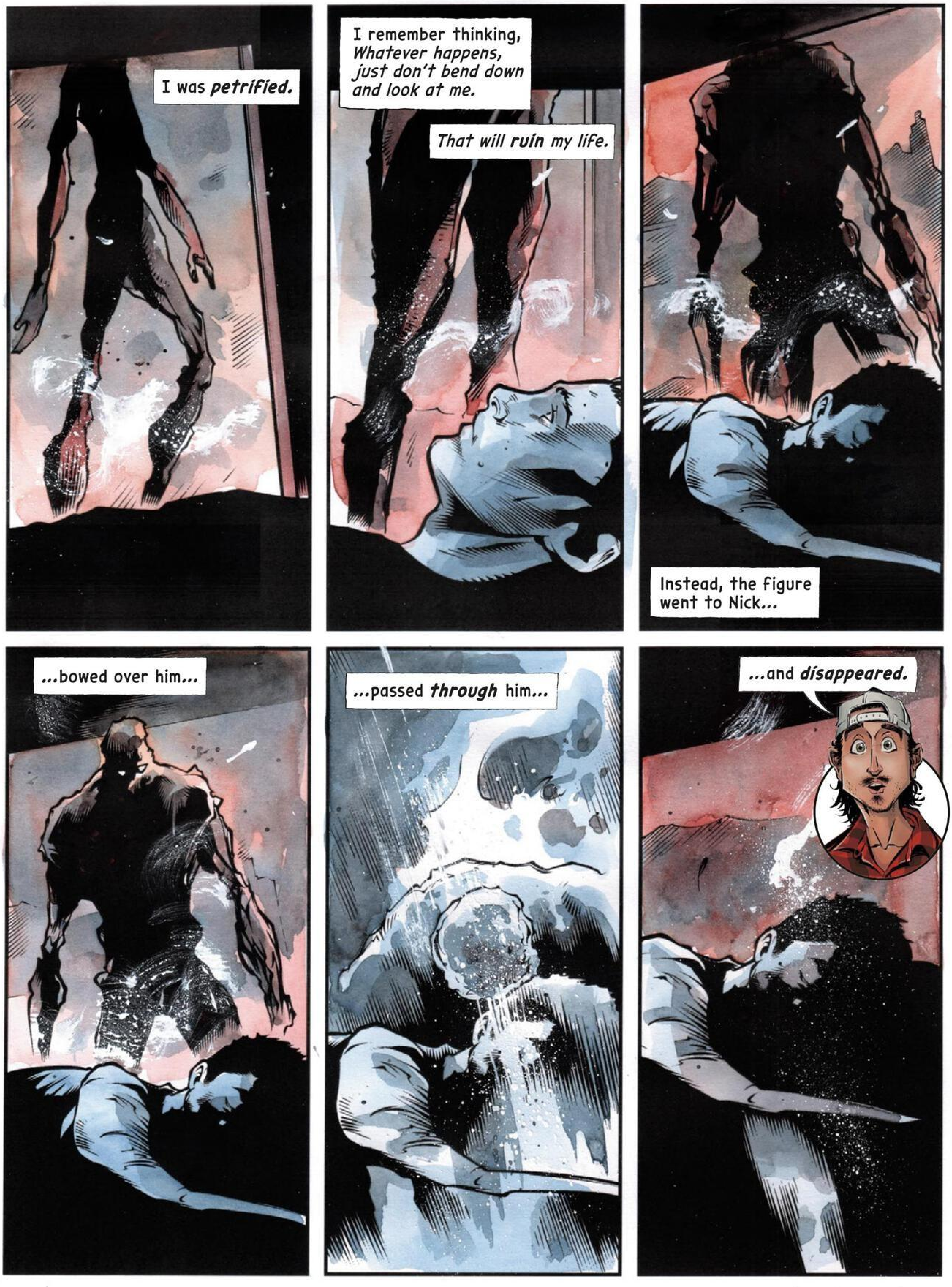
When I was sixteen, I was an ***avid snowboarder.***
Every winter, I took a snowboarding trip with my two very close friends, Nick and Wolf.
Nick's family owned a small, secluded cabin on an abandoned ski resort in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and that was where we went riding every year.
We had ***great times*** there.
But in the winter of my sixteenth year, Nick's father unexpectedly passed away.
I thought the snowboarding trip would be canceled, but Nick asked if we still wanted to go.
It would be the ***last time*** I went. After that trip, I ***never*** snowboarded again, because...
...what I saw in my room still ***haunts*** me.

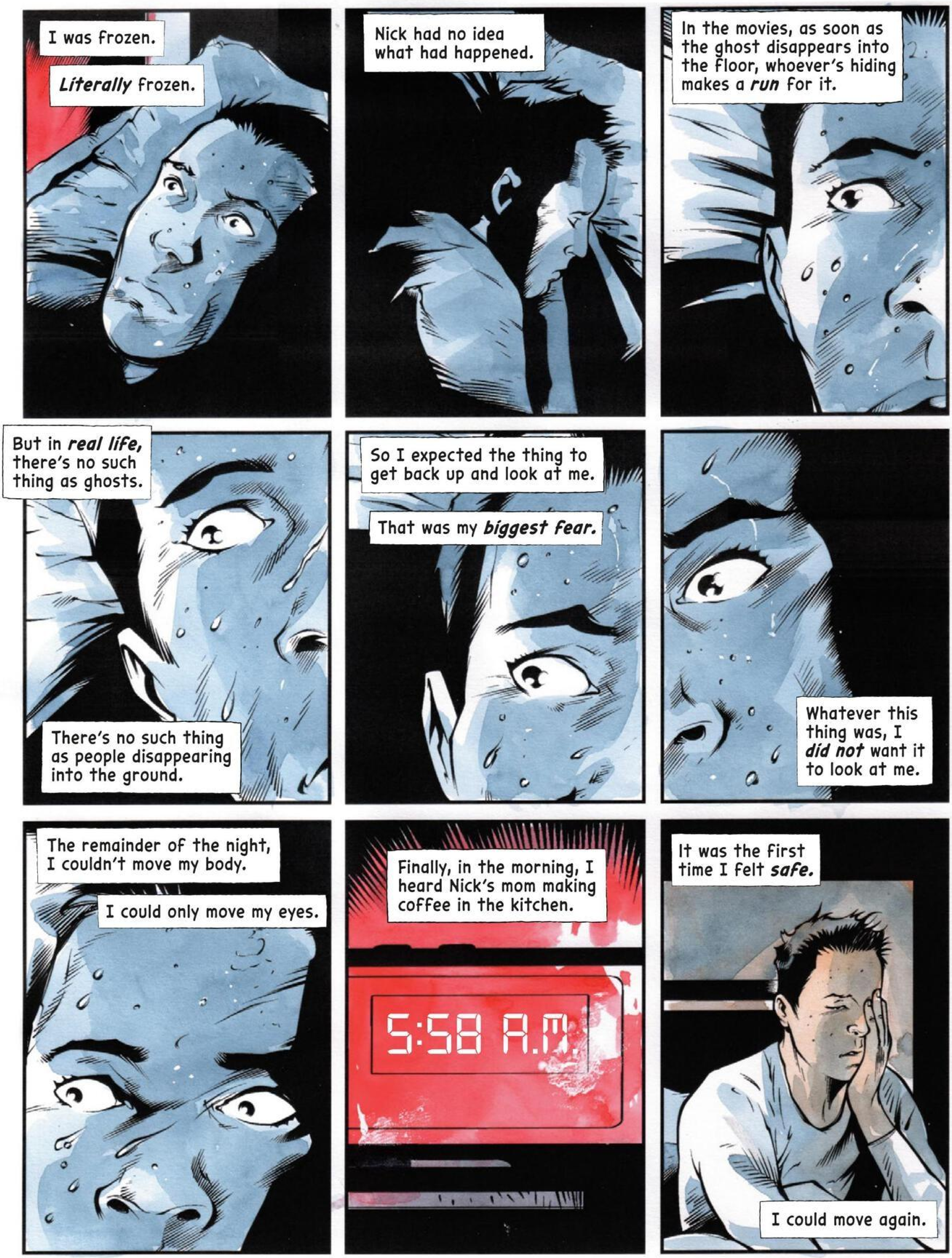

As we drove up, it was so apparent that Nick's dad was missing.
Everything was different without him.
We exhausted ourselves snowboarding that first day...
...then went back to the cabin, where we planned to crash early so we could wake up early and get in a *full day* of riding.
Nick, Wolf, and I shared a room that was at the end of a short hallway.

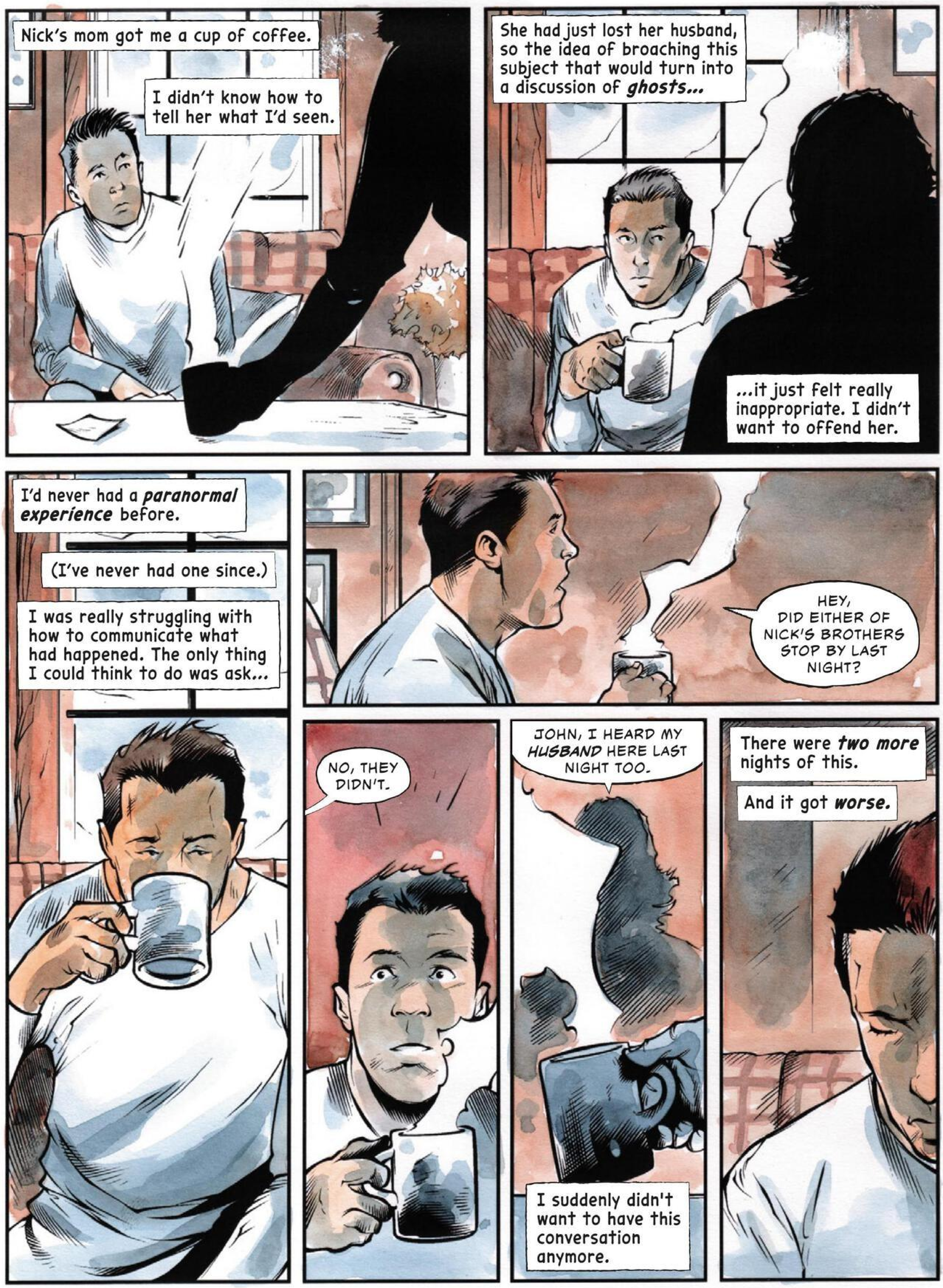

This part of the cabin was carved out of the mountain, so the room had no windows.
It was a *tight space* with a queen-size bed for Nick and two bunks for Wolf and me.
Sometime around 11:00 or 12:00 that night, both Nick and Wolf fell asleep.
It's important to understand that at night in the mountains, the *silence* and *darkness* are virtually total.
No streetlights. No neighbors.
Inside our room--windowless, the door closed--the silence and darkness were *deeper.*
The only light came from a digital clock.
3:17 A.M.
In that red-tinted blackness...
...I couldn't fall asleep.
I counted the minutes.
I counted *hours.*

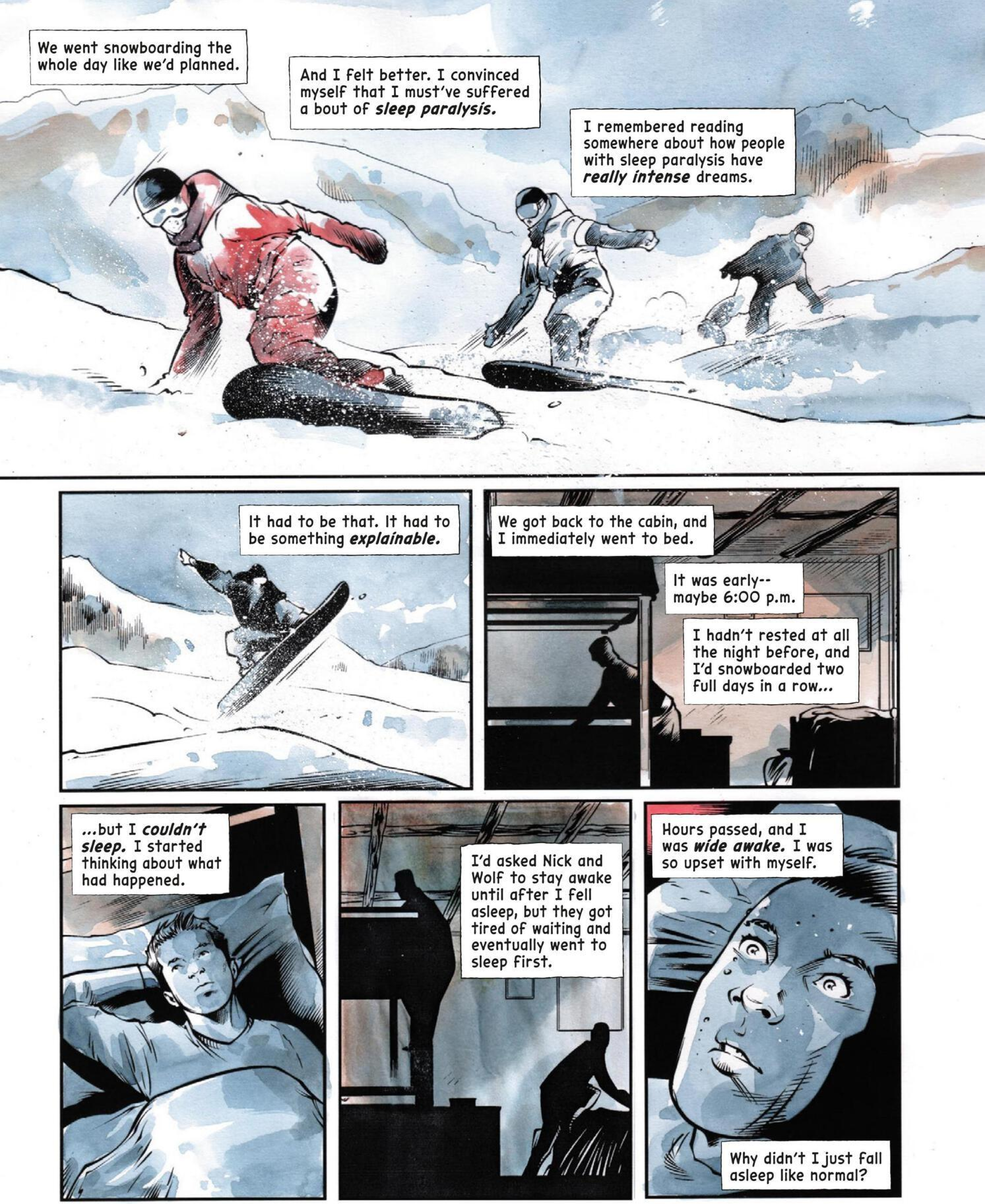

And then...
CLOMP CLOMP CLOMP
...I heard **hollow footsteps** on the wraparound porch.
KLINK KLINKL
The sleigh bells hanging on the front door chimed.
Now, Nick had two older brothers whom I'd never met, but his mom had told us they might stop by during our trip.
So I figured it must be one of them.
Then a pot fell in the kitchen.
KLONG
I wasn't worried or scared. In real life, an enormous number of anomalies must ***stack up*** for your brain to say something is wrong.
It just struck me that whoever had arrived, he was making a lot of commotion for the middle of the night.

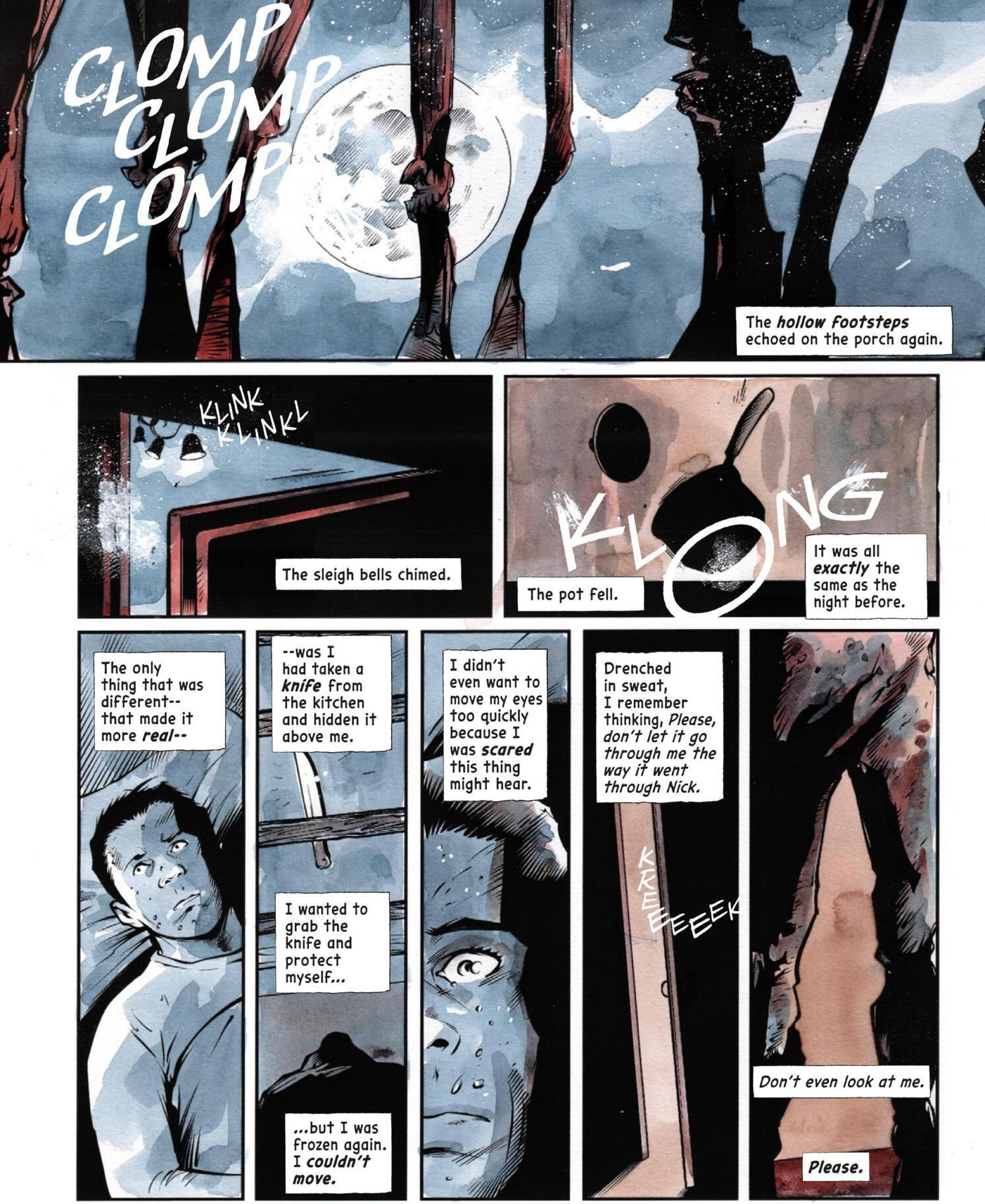

The footsteps continued down our hallway.
CLOMP
CLOMP
CLOMP
CLOMP
CLOMP
Hollow. *Echoing.*
Why were they echoing? Whoever was walking, he wasn't on the elevated porch anymore. He was *inside.* On *solid flooring.*
Of all the weird things that were happening, though, the *one thing* that made the hair on the back of my neck *stand up* was the front door had never closed.
Why didn't he close the front door?
The footsteps stopped outside the bedroom door.
CLOMP
KREEEEEEK
And then this...*thing* entered our room.
A *black silhouette.* It was--


I was *petrified.*
I remember thinking, *Whatever happens, just don't bend down and look at me.*
*That will **ruin** my life.*
Instead, the figure went to Nick...
...bowed over him...
...passed ***through*** him...
...and ***disappeared.***

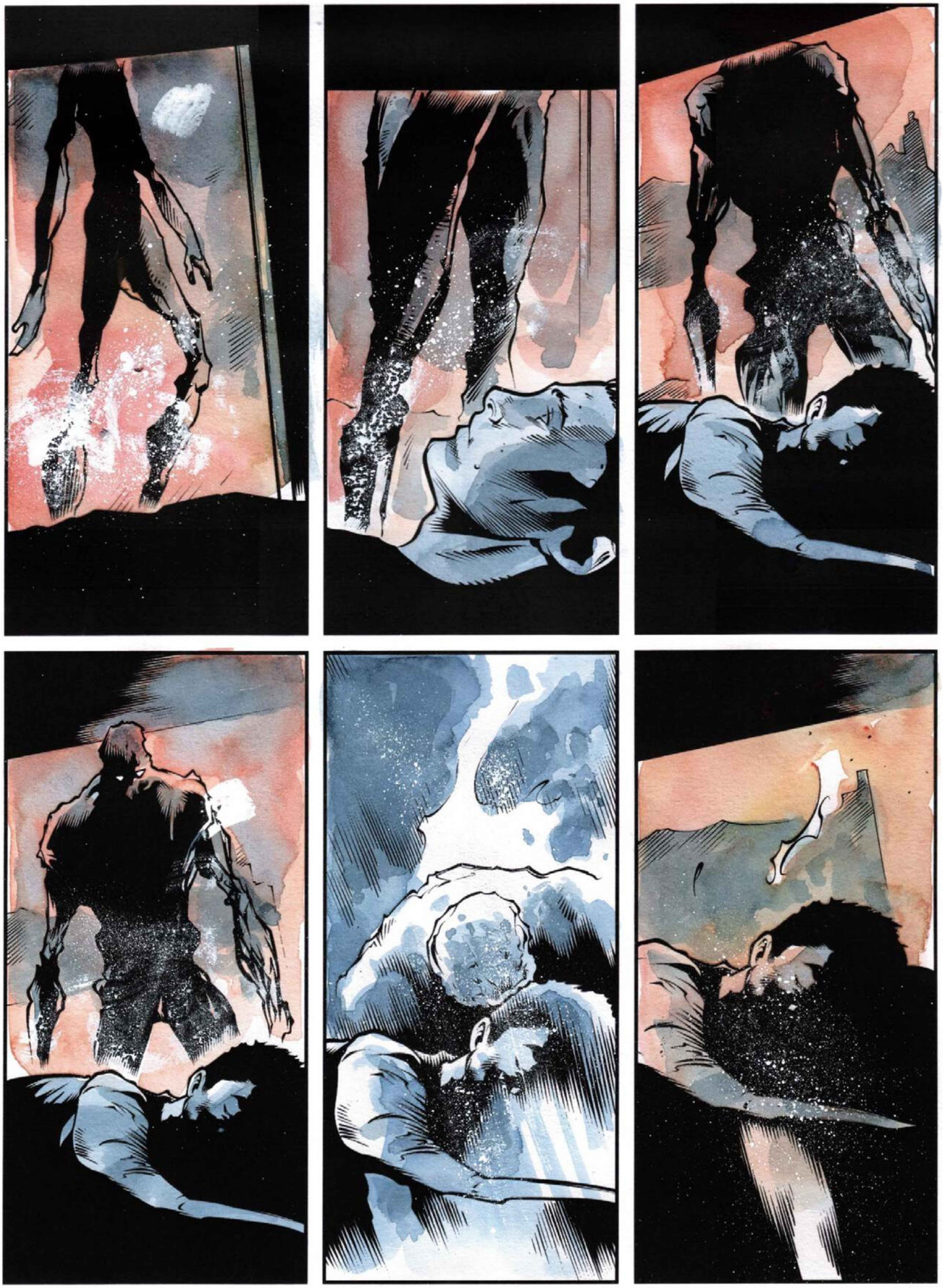

I was frozen.
Literally frozen.
Nick had no idea what had happened.
In the movies, as soon as the ghost disappears into the floor, whoever's hiding makes a ***run*** for it.
But in ***real life,*** there's no such thing as ghosts.
There's no such thing as people disappearing into the ground.
So I expected the thing to get back up and look at me.
That was my ***biggest fear.***
Whatever this thing was, I ***did not*** want it to look at me.
The remainder of the night, I couldn't move my body.
I could only move my eyes.
Finally, in the morning, I heard Nick's mom making coffee in the kitchen.
5:58 A.M.
It was the first time I felt ***safe.***
I could move again.

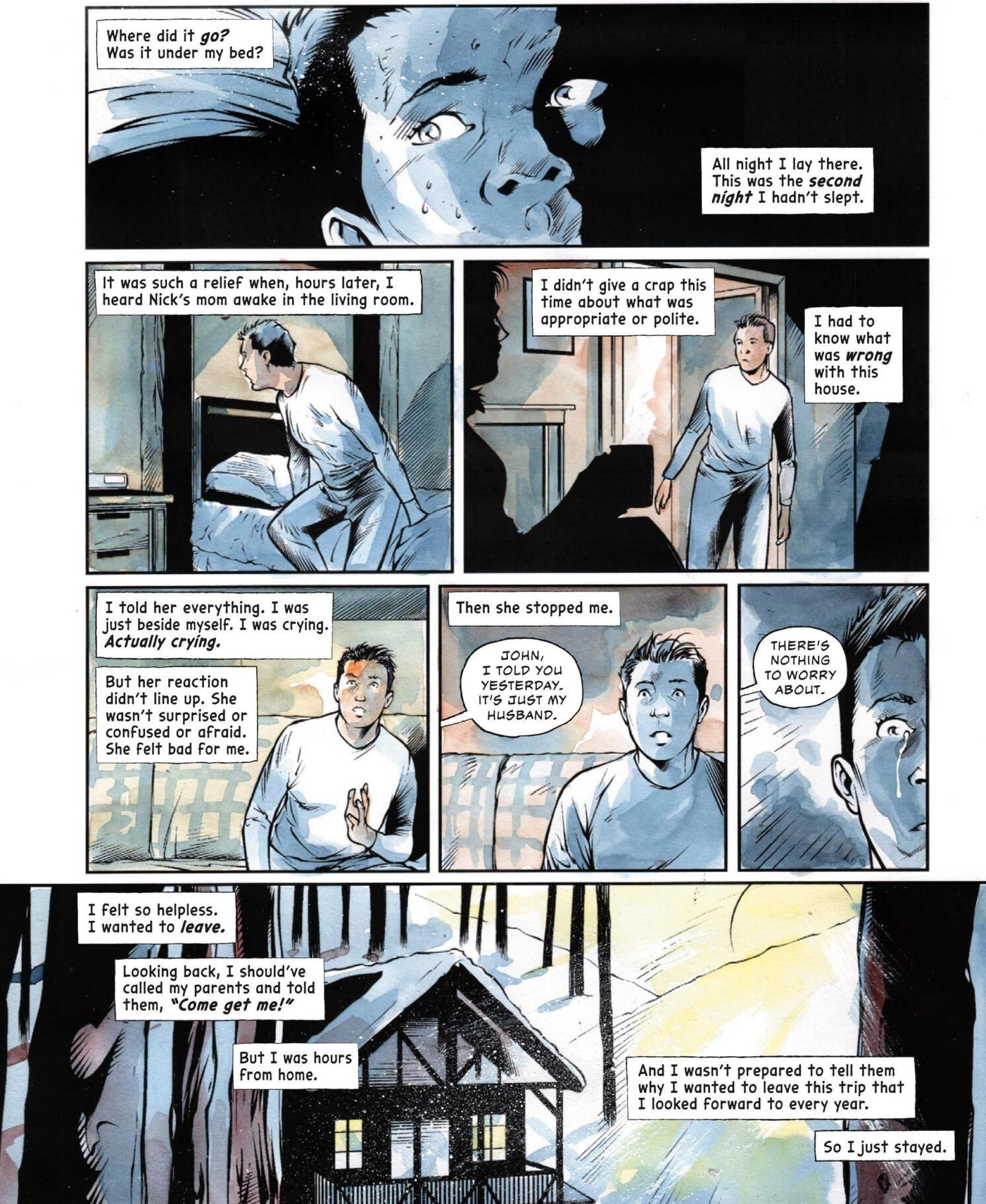

Nick's mom got me a cup of coffee.
I didn't know how to tell her what I'd seen.
She had just lost her husband, so the idea of broaching this subject that would turn into a discussion of ***ghosts...***
...it just felt really inappropriate. I didn't want to offend her.
I'd never had a ***paranormal experience*** before.
(I've never had one since.)
I was really struggling with how to communicate what had happened. The only thing I could think to do was ask...
HEY, DID EITHER OF NICK'S BROTHERS STOP BY LAST NIGHT?
NO, THEY DIDN'T.
JOHN, I HEARD MY ***HUSBAND*** HERE LAST NIGHT TOO.
I suddenly didn't want to have this conversation anymore.
There were ***two more*** nights of this.
And it got ***worse.***

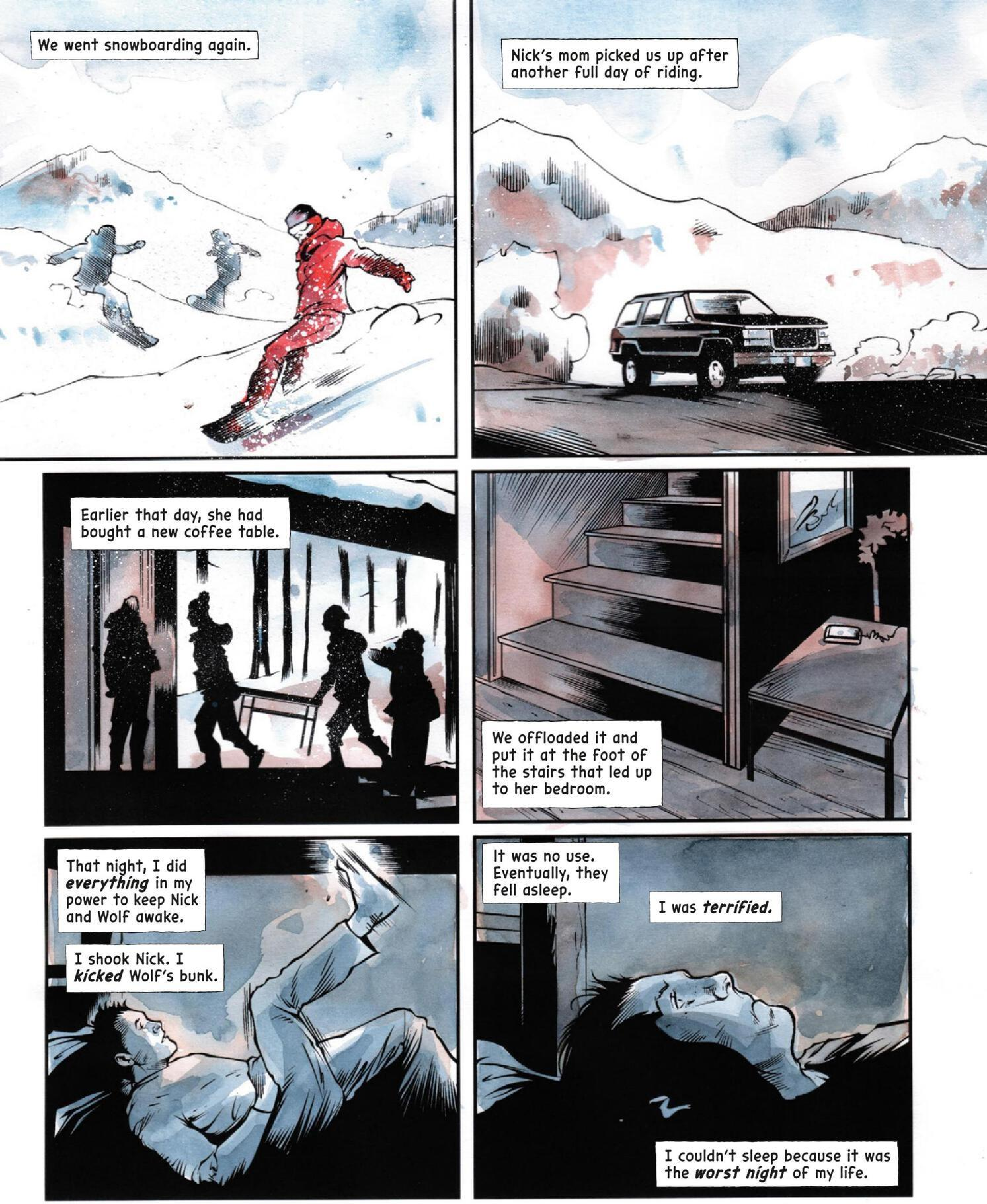

We went snowboarding the whole day like we'd planned.
And I felt better. I convinced myself that I must've suffered a bout of *sleep paralysis.*
I remembered reading somewhere about how people with sleep paralysis have *really intense* dreams.
It had to be that. It had to be something *explainable.*
We got back to the cabin, and I immediately went to bed.
It was early-- maybe 6:00 p.m.
I hadn't rested at all the night before, and I'd snowboarded two full days in a row...
...but I *couldn't sleep.* I started thinking about what had happened.
I'd asked Nick and Wolf to stay awake until after I fell asleep, but they got tired of waiting and eventually went to sleep first.
Hours passed, and I was *wide awake.* I was so upset with myself.
Why didn't I just fall asleep like normal?

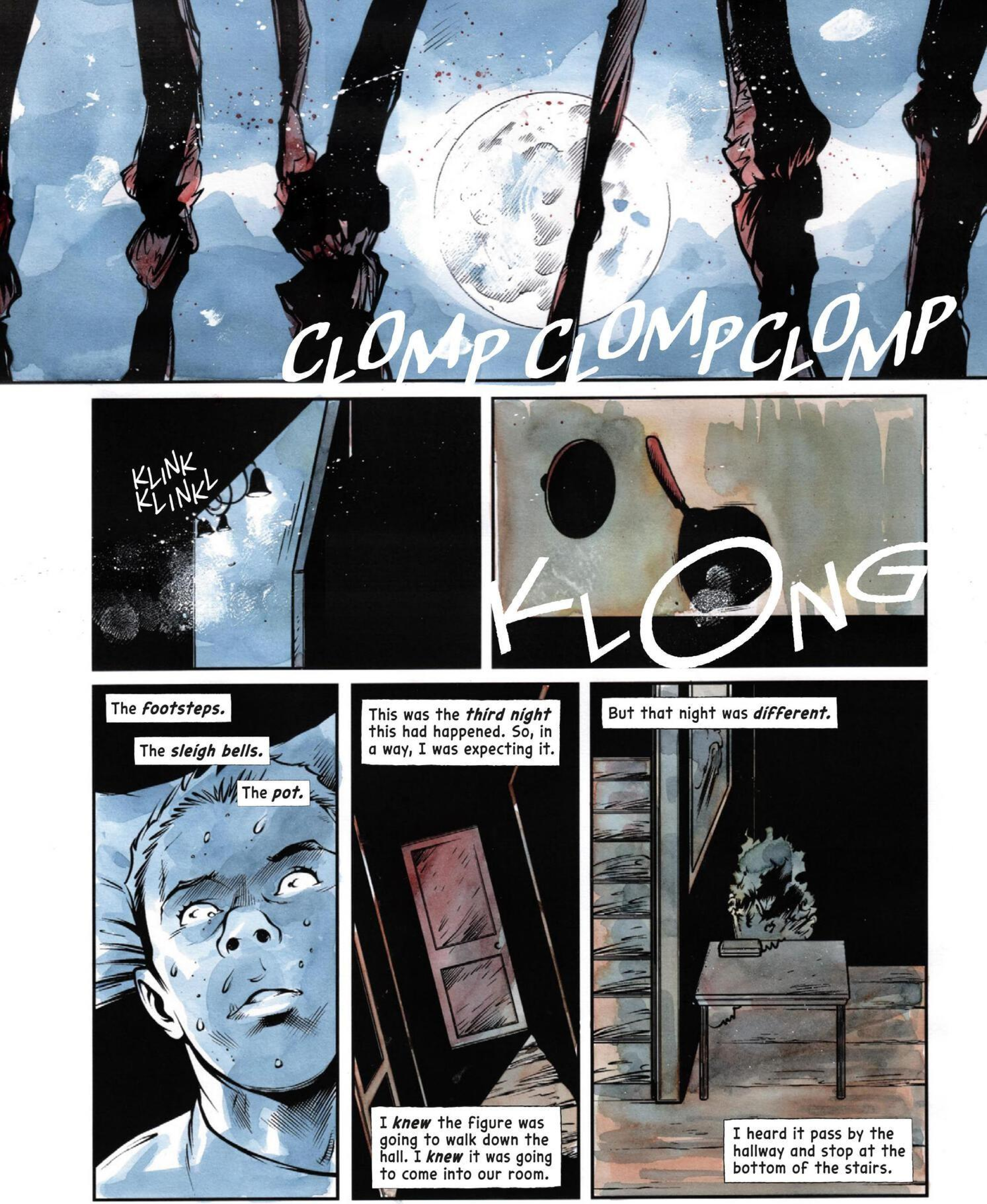


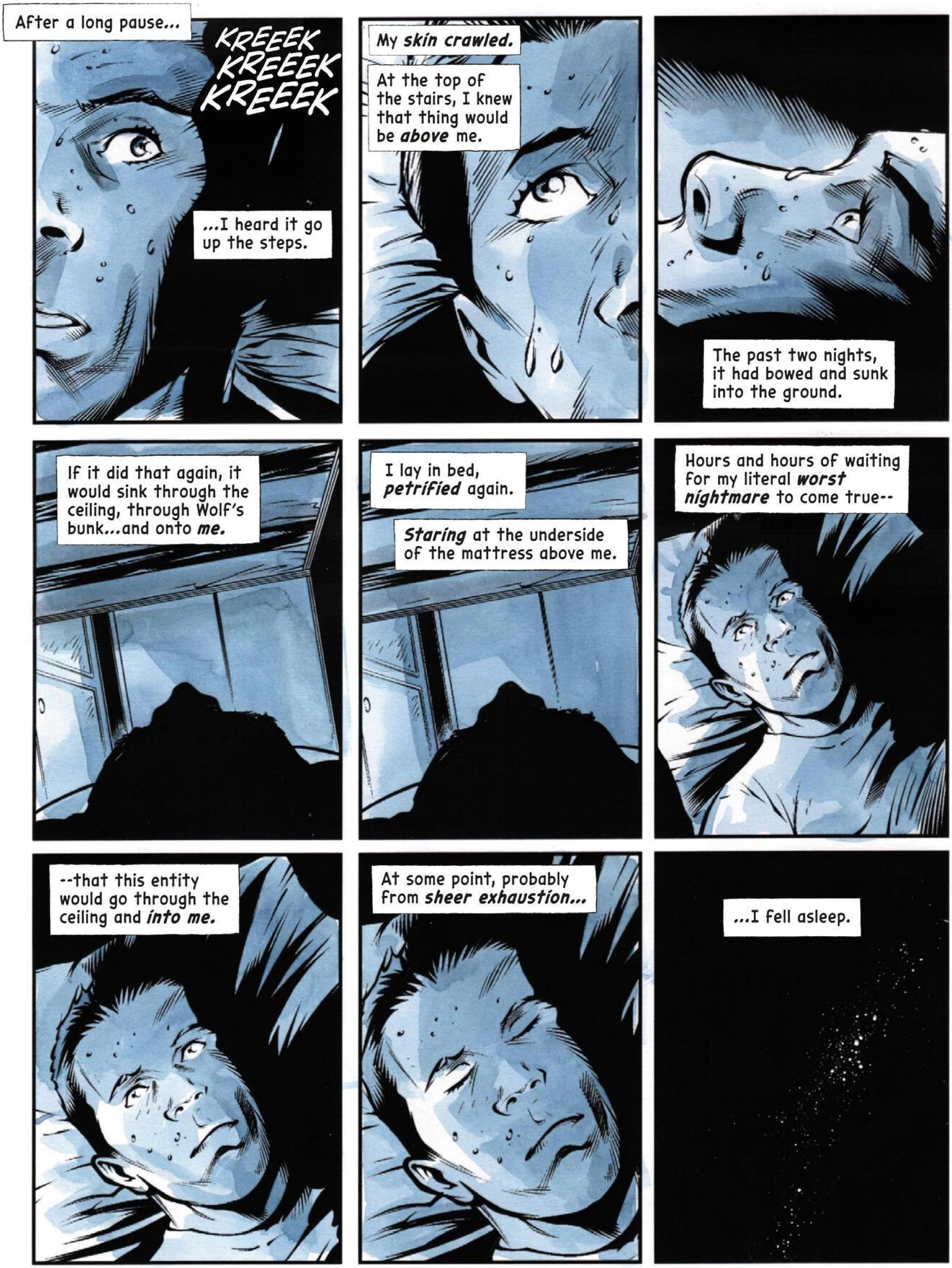
CLOMP CLOMP CLOMP
The *hollow footsteps* echoed on the porch again.
KLINK KLINKL
The sleigh bells chimed.
KLONG
The pot fell.
It was all *exactly* the same as the night before.
The only thing that was different--that made it more *real*--
--was I had taken a *knife* from the kitchen and hidden it above me.
I wanted to grab the knife and protect myself...
...but I was frozen again. I *couldn't move.*
I didn't even want to move my eyes too quickly because I was *scared* this thing might hear.
Drenched in sweat, I remember thinking, *Please, don't let it go through me the way it went through Nick.*
KREEEEEEK
Don't even look at me.
Please.

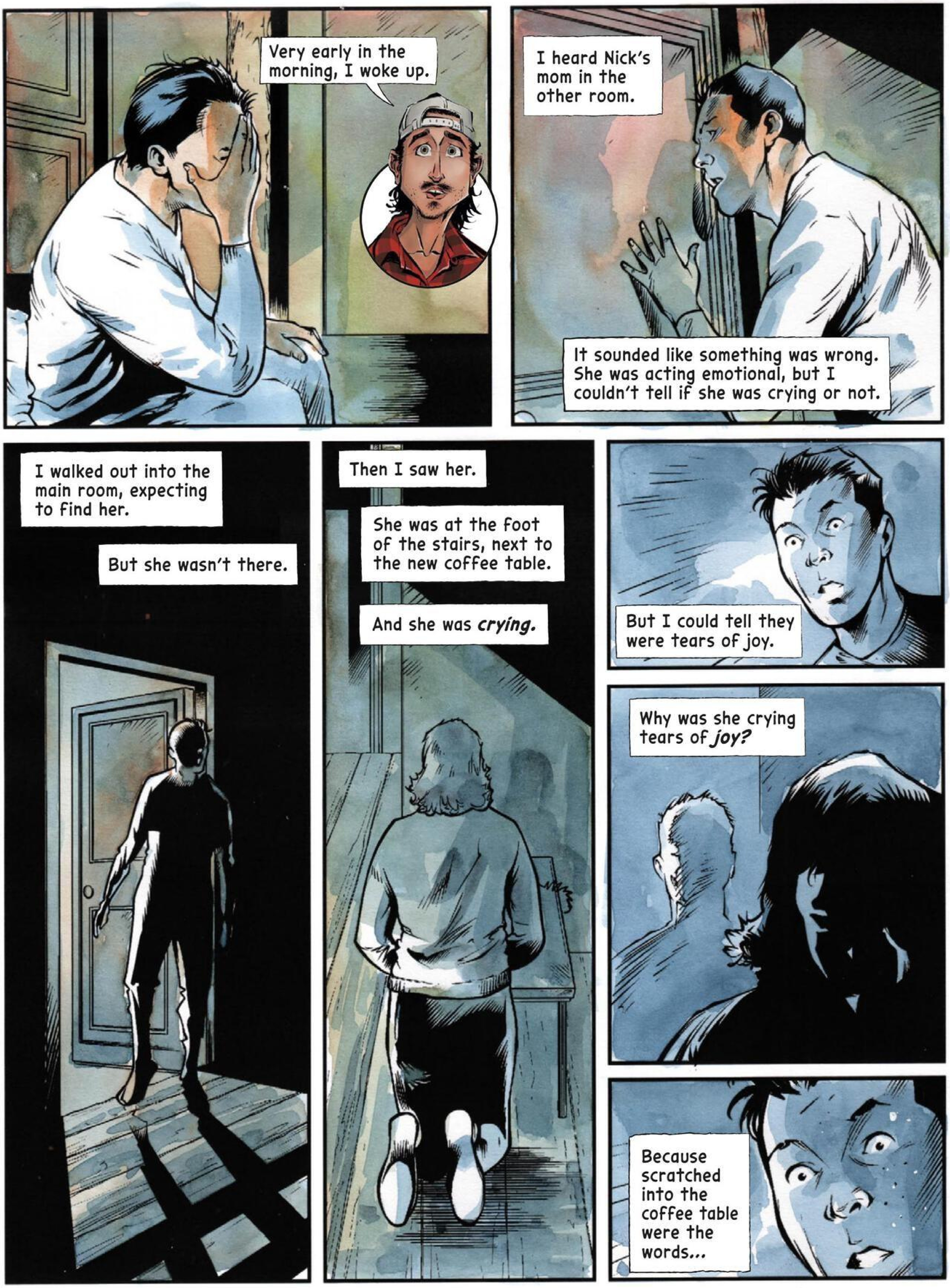


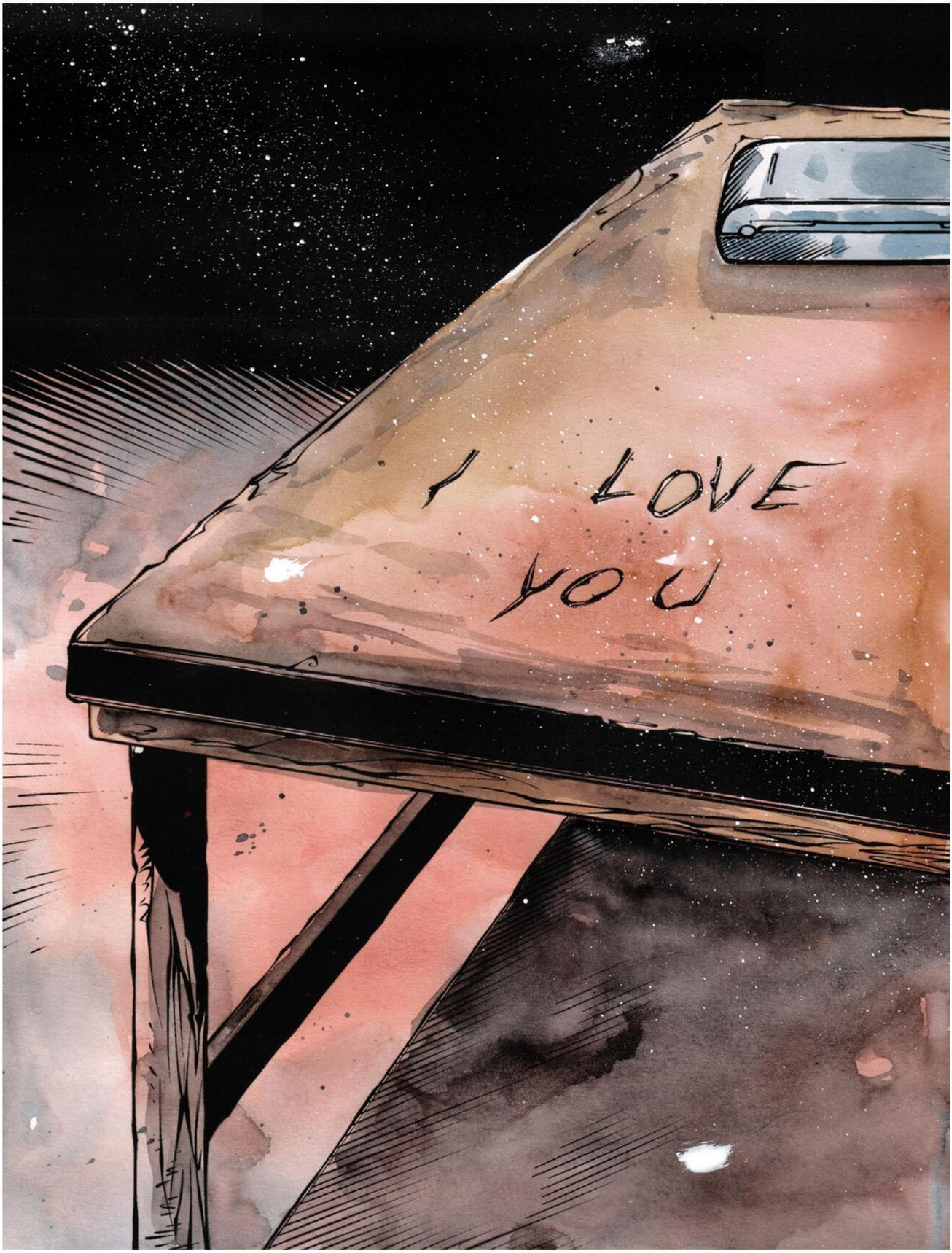

Where did it *go?* Was it under my bed?
All night I lay there. This was the ***second night*** I hadn't slept.
It was such a relief when, hours later, I heard Nick's mom awake in the living room.
I didn't give a crap this time about what was appropriate or polite.
I had to know what was ***wrong*** with this house.
I told her everything. I was just beside myself. I was crying. ***Actually crying.***
But her reaction didn't line up. She wasn't surprised or confused or afraid. She felt bad for me.
Then she stopped me.
JOHN, I TOLD YOU YESTERDAY. IT'S JUST MY HUSBAND.
THERE'S NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT.
I felt so helpless. I wanted to ***leave.***
Looking back, I should've called my parents and told them, ***"Come get me!"***
But I was hours from home.
And I wasn't prepared to tell them why I wanted to leave this trip that I looked forward to every year.
So I just stayed.


We went snowboarding again.
Nick's mom picked us up after another full day of riding.
Earlier that day, she had bought a new coffee table.
We offloaded it and put it at the foot of the stairs that led up to her bedroom.
That night, I did *everything* in my power to keep Nick and Wolf awake.
I shook Nick. I *kicked* Wolf's bunk.
It was no use. Eventually, they fell asleep.
I was *terrified.*
I couldn't sleep because it was the *worst night* of my life.

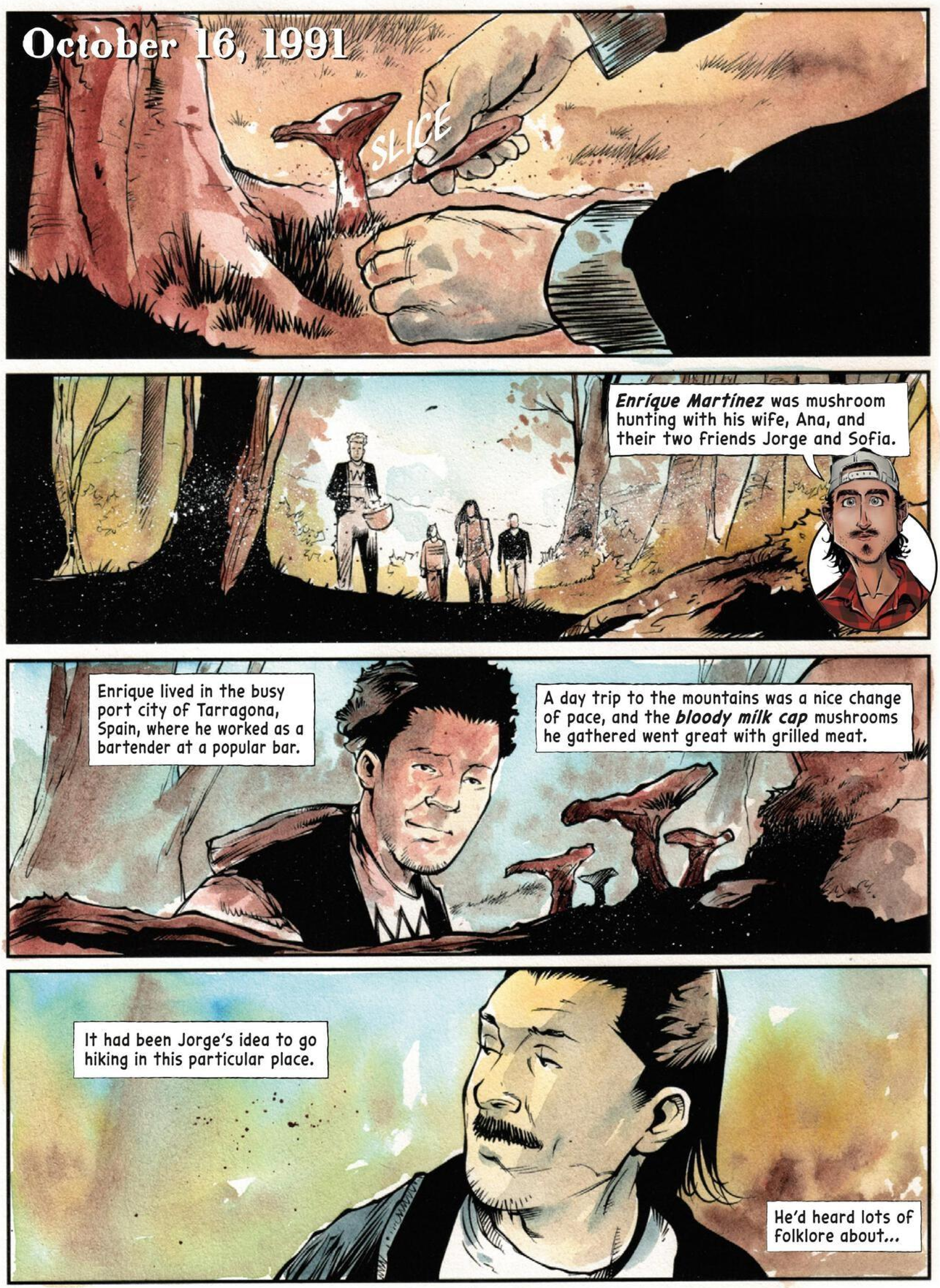

CLOMP CLOMP CLOMP
KLINK KLINKL
KLONG
The *footsteps.*
The *sleigh bells.*
The *pot.*
This was the *third night* this had happened. So, in a way, I was expecting it.
I *knew* the figure was going to walk down the hall. I *knew* it was going to come into our room.
But that night was *different.*
I heard it pass by the hallway and stop at the bottom of the stairs.

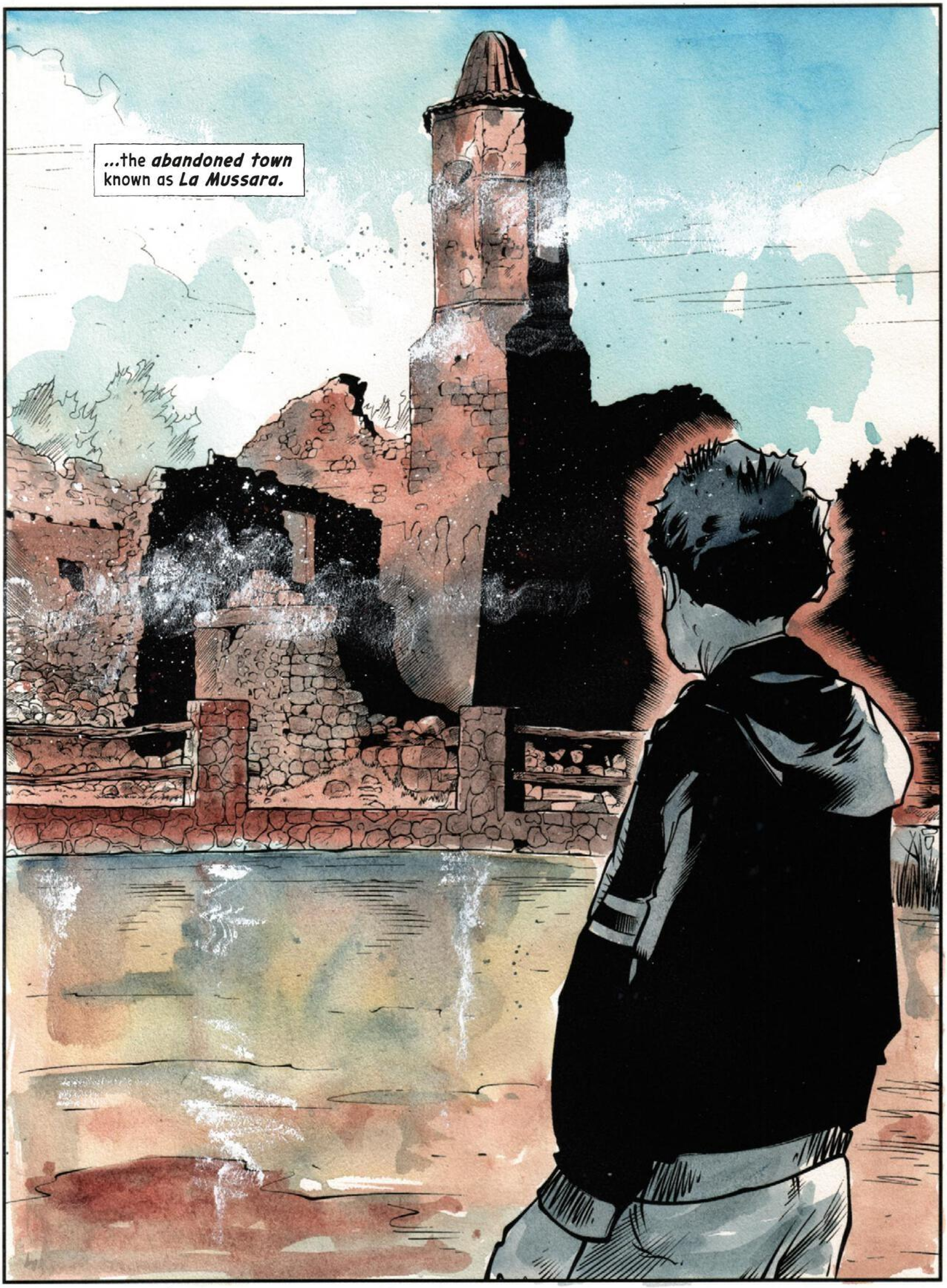

After a long pause...
KREEEK KREEEK KREEEK
...I heard it go up the steps.
My *skin crawled.*
At the top of the stairs, I knew that thing would be *above* me.
The past two nights, it had bowed and sunk into the ground.
If it did that again, it would sink through the ceiling, through Wolf's bunk...and onto *me.*
I lay in bed, *petrified* again.
Staring at the underside of the mattress above me.
Hours and hours of waiting for my literal *worst nightmare* to come true--
--that this entity would go through the ceiling and *into me.*
At some point, probably from *sheer exhaustion...*
...I fell asleep.

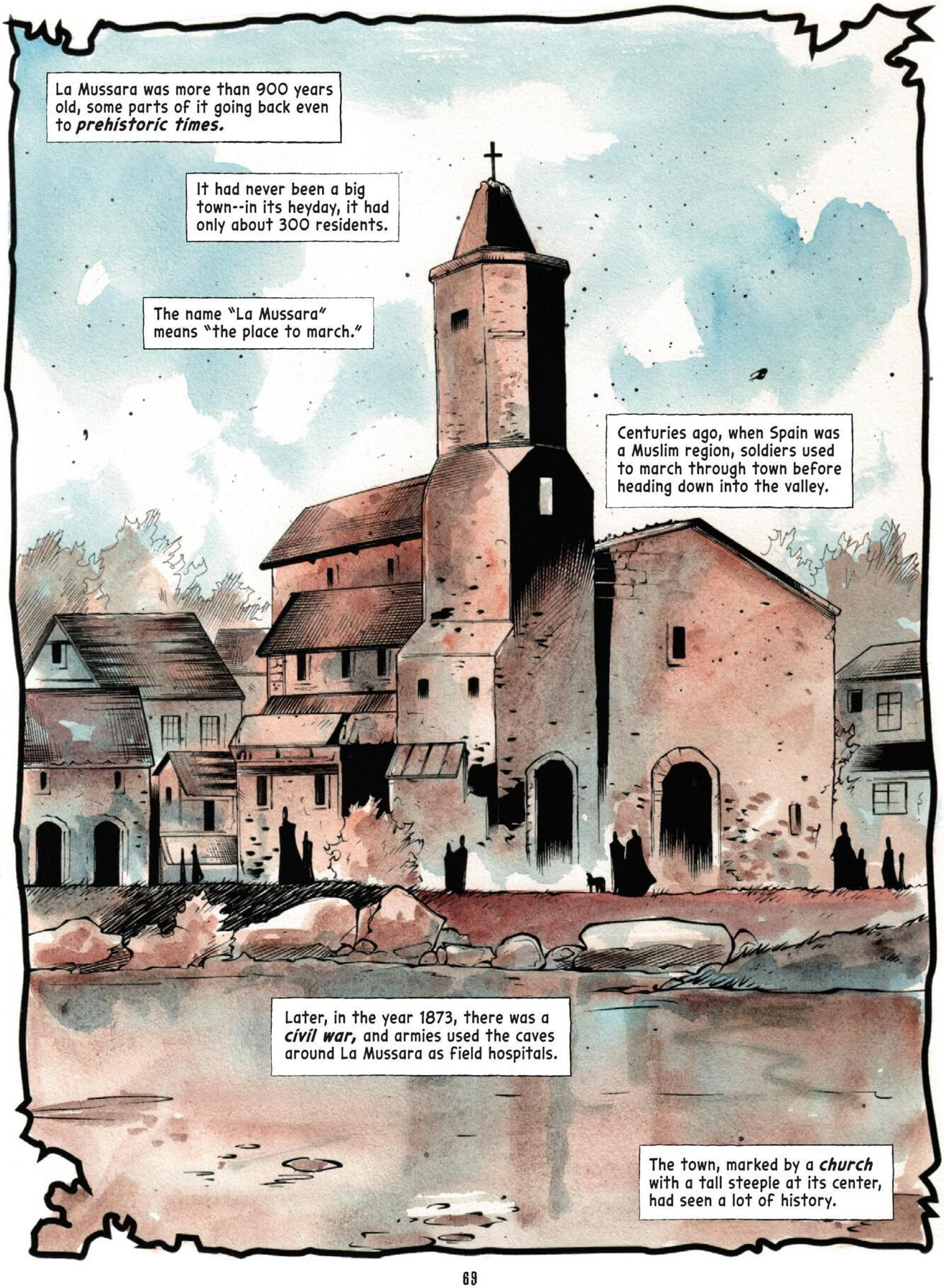

Very early in the morning, I woke up.
I heard Nick's mom in the other room.
It sounded like something was wrong. She was acting emotional, but I couldn't tell if she was crying or not.
I walked out into the main room, expecting to find her.
But she wasn't there.
Then I saw her.
She was at the foot of the stairs, next to the new coffee table.
And she was *crying.*
But I could tell they were tears of joy.
Why was she crying tears of *joy?*
Because scratched into the coffee table were the words...

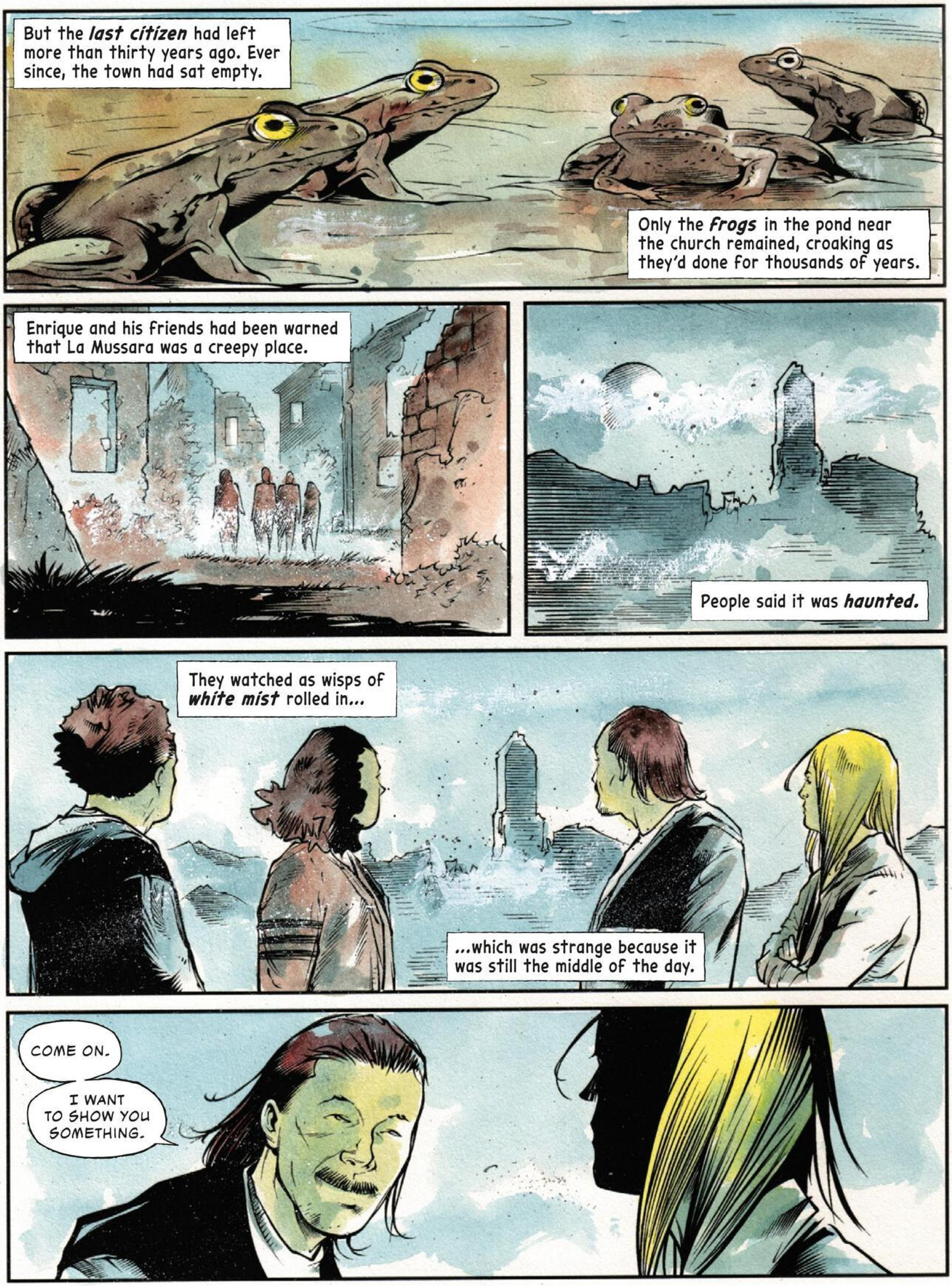

I LOVE
YOU

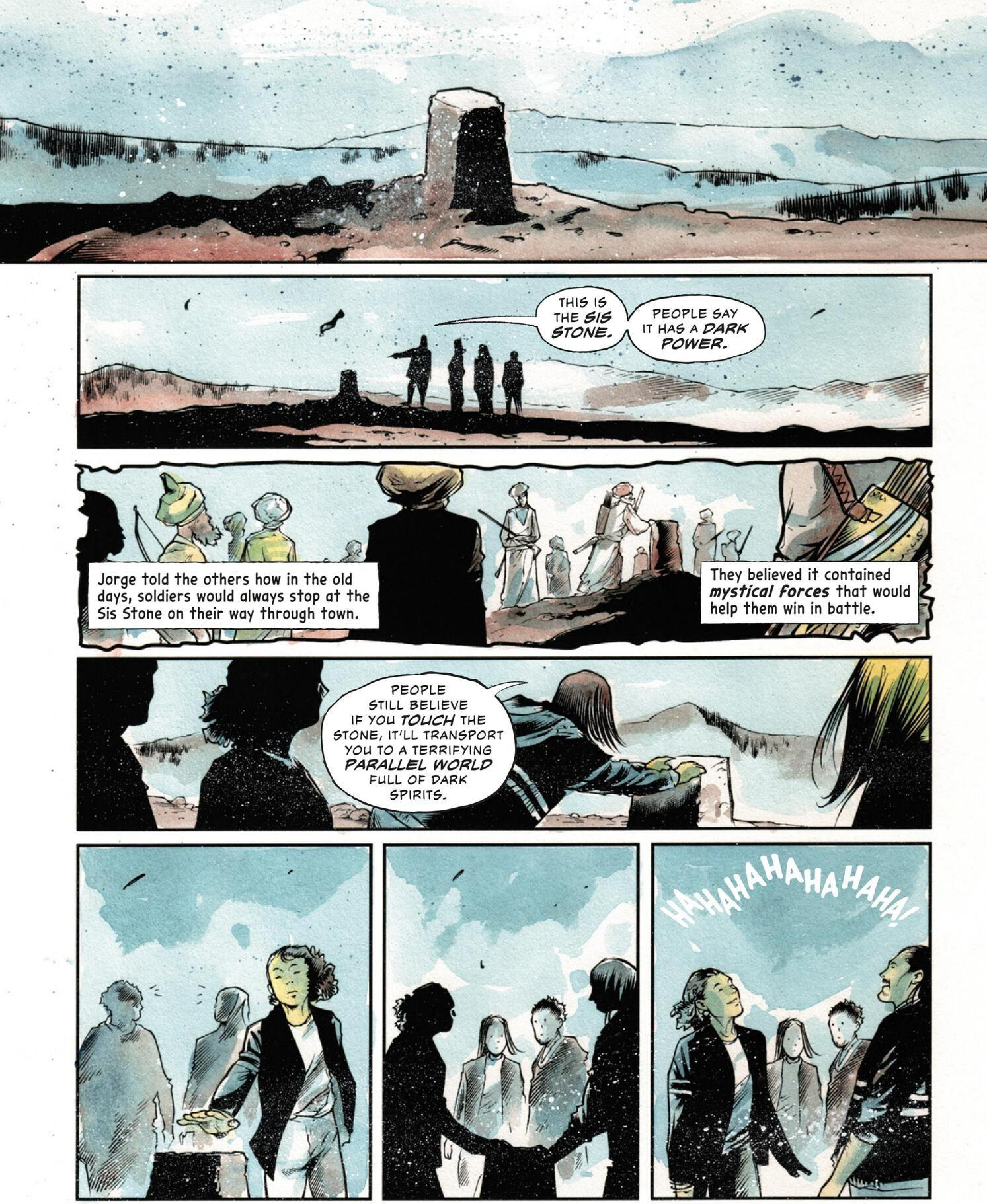
LA MUSSARA

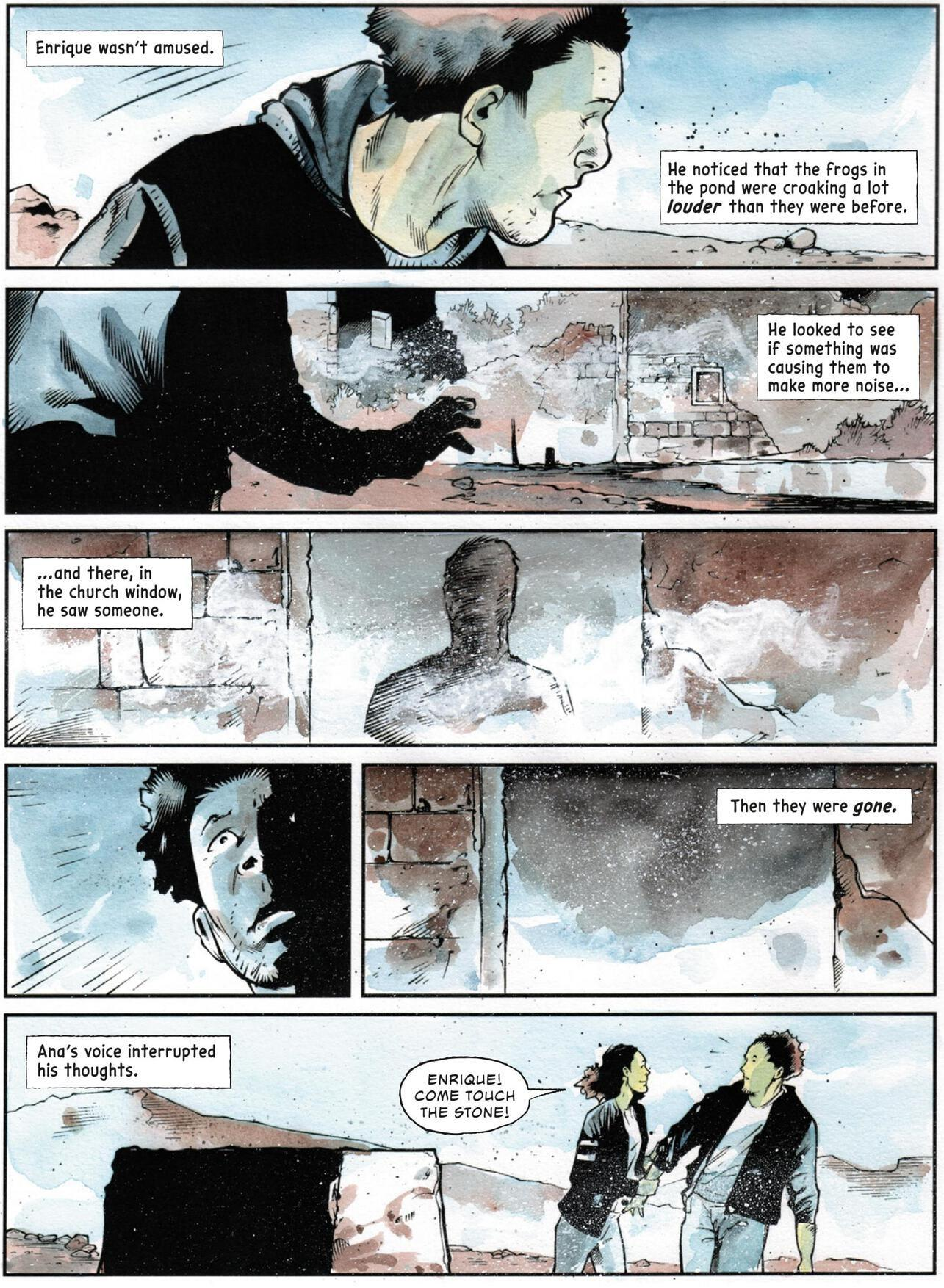

October 16, 1991
SLICE
Enrique Martínez was mushroom hunting with his wife, Ana, and their two friends Jorge and Sofia.
Enrique lived in the busy port city of Tarragona, Spain, where he worked as a bartender at a popular bar.
A day trip to the mountains was a nice change of pace, and the *bloody milk cap* mushrooms he gathered went great with grilled meat.
It had been Jorge's idea to go hiking in this particular place.
He'd heard lots of folklore about...

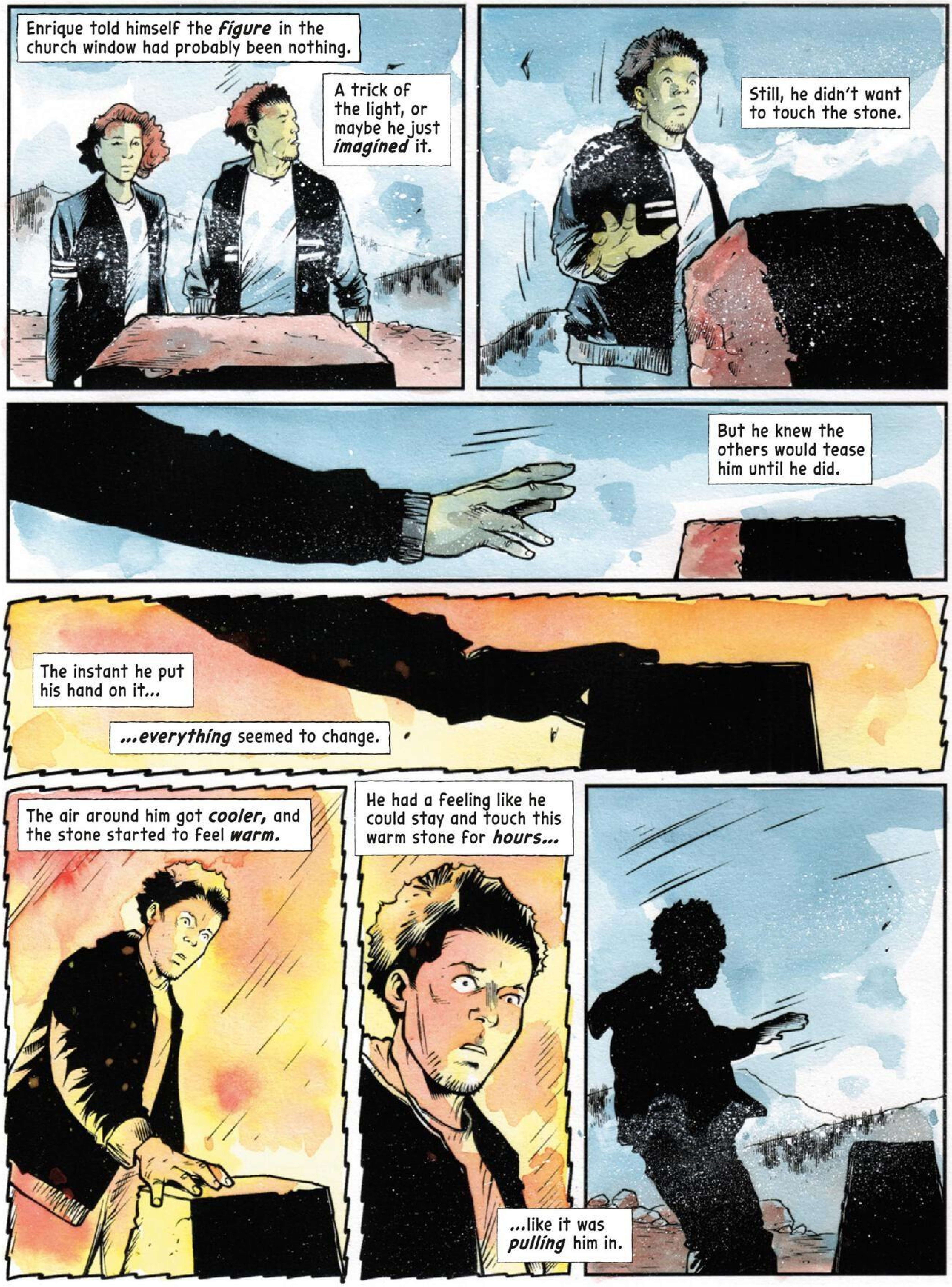

...the *abandoned town* known as *La Mussara.*

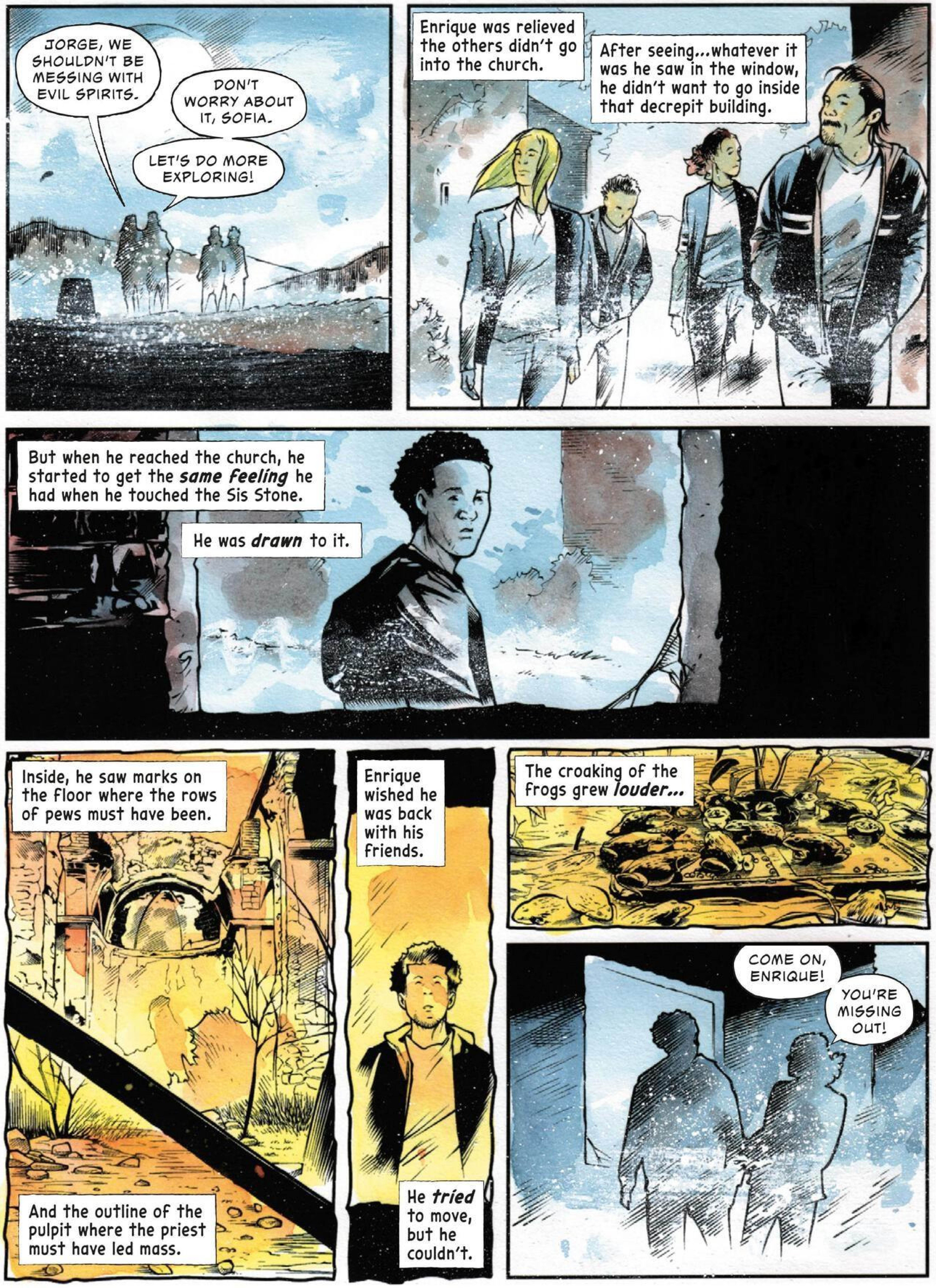

La Mussara was more than 900 years old, some parts of it going back even to ***prehistoric times.***
It had never been a big town--in its heyday, it had only about 300 residents.
The name "La Mussara" means "the place to march."
Centuries ago, when Spain was a Muslim region, soldiers used to march through town before heading down into the valley.
Later, in the year 1873, there was a ***civil war,*** and armies used the caves around La Mussara as field hospitals.
The town, marked by a ***church*** with a tall steeple at its center, had seen a lot of history.

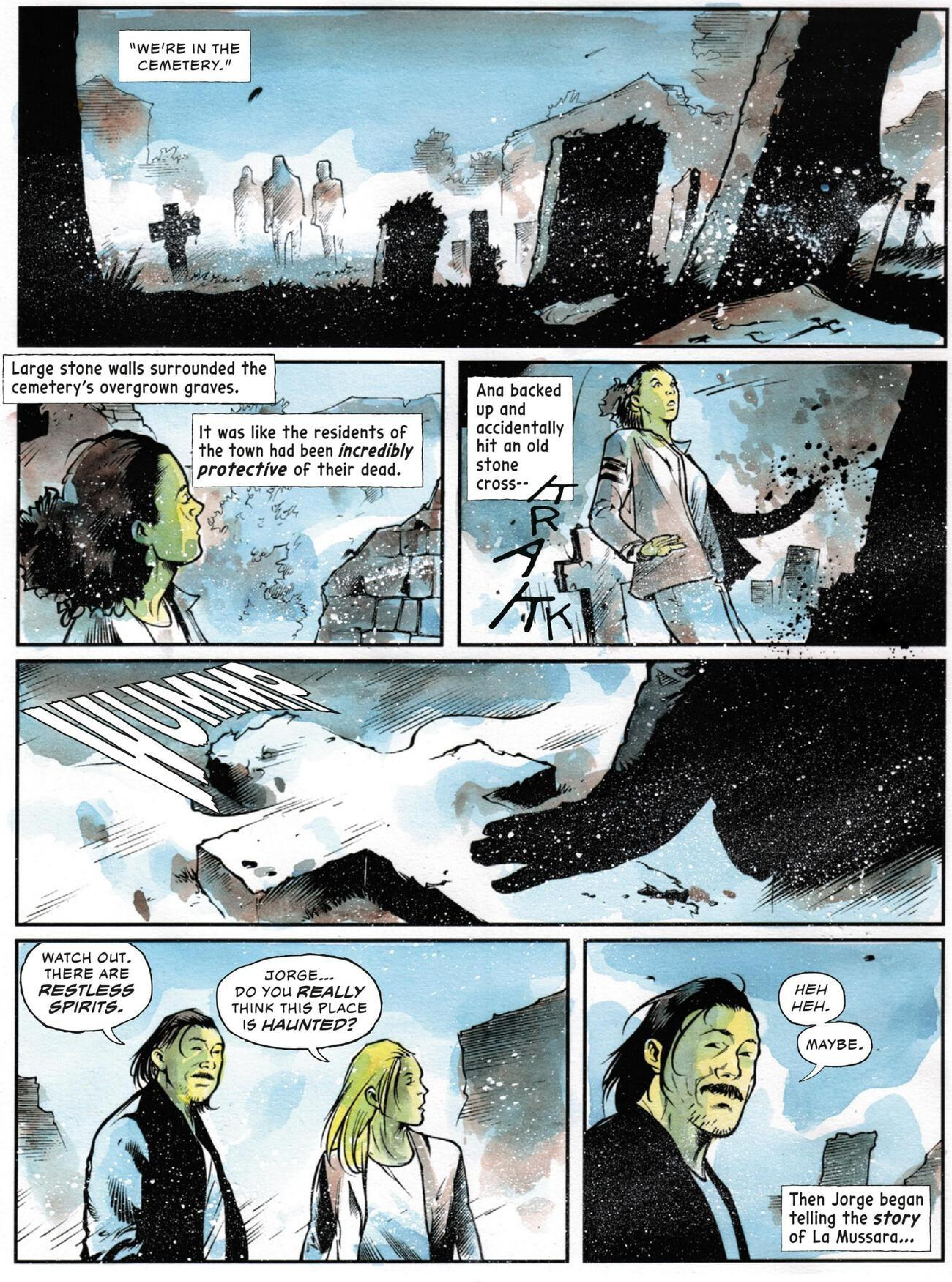

But the *last citizen* had left more than thirty years ago. Ever since, the town had sat empty.
Only the *frogs* in the pond near the church remained, croaking as they'd done for thousands of years.
Enrique and his friends had been warned that La Mussara was a creepy place.
People said it was *haunted.*
They watched as wisps of *white mist* rolled in...
...which was strange because it was still the middle of the day.
COME ON.
I WANT TO SHOW YOU SOMETHING.

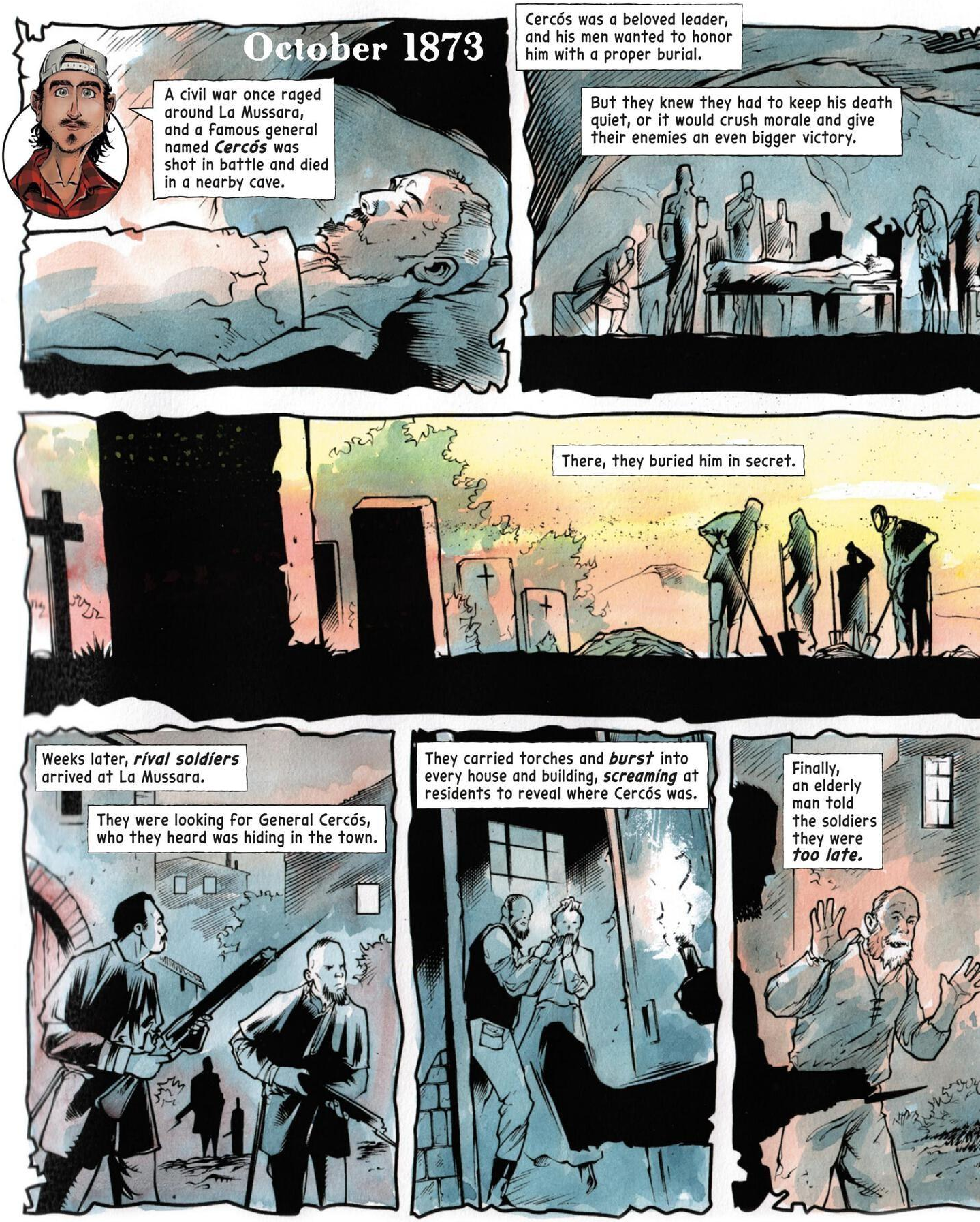

THIS IS THE *SIS STONE.*
PEOPLE SAY IT HAS A *DARK POWER.*
Jorge told the others how in the old days, soldiers would always stop at the Sis Stone on their way through town.
They believed it contained ***mystical forces*** that would help them win in battle.
PEOPLE STILL BELIEVE IF YOU *TOUCH* THE STONE, IT'LL TRANSPORT YOU TO A TERRIFYING *PARALLEL WORLD* FULL OF DARK SPIRITS.
HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

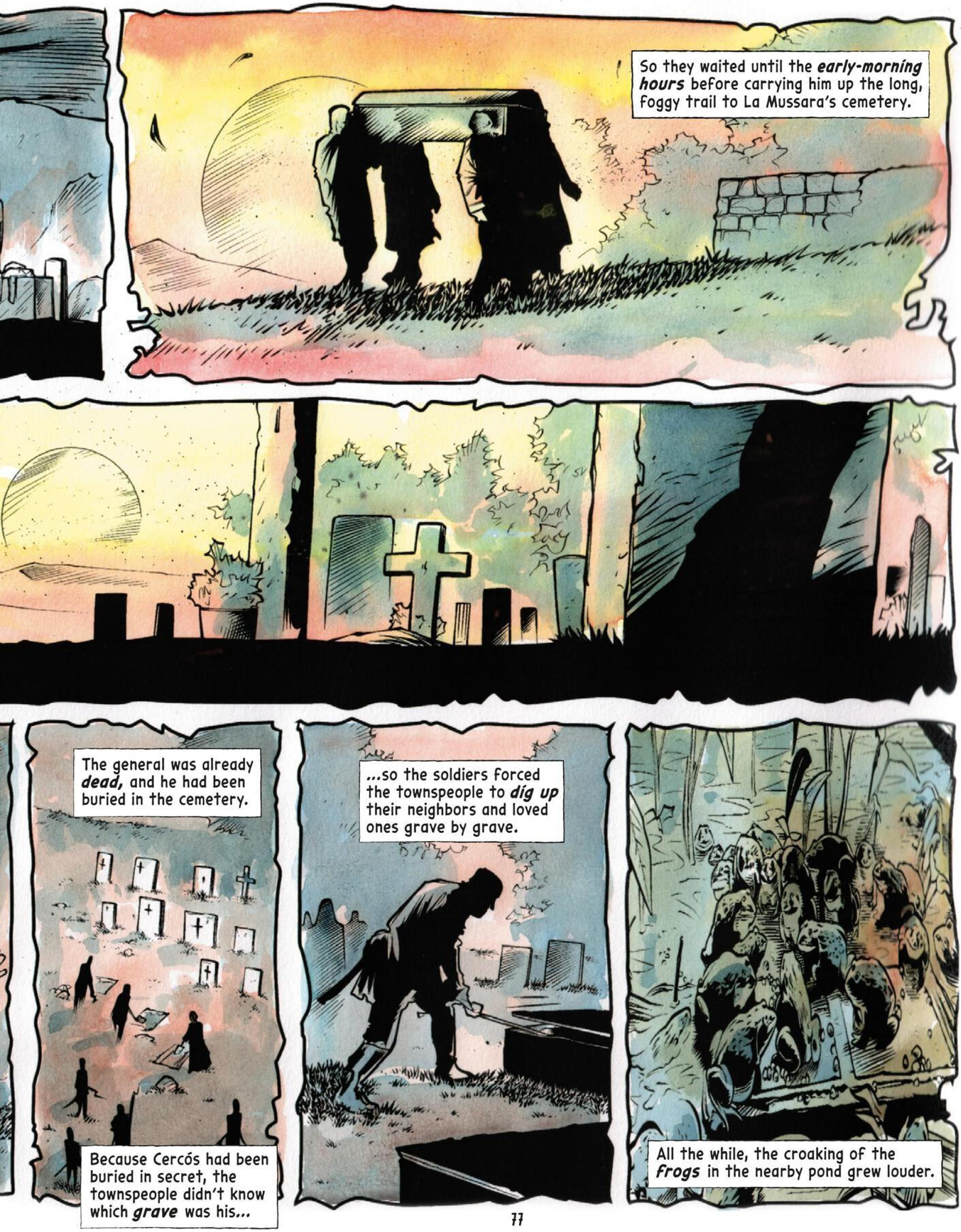

Enrique wasn't amused.
He noticed that the frogs in the pond were croaking a lot *louder* than they were before.
He looked to see if something was causing them to make more noise...
...and there, in the church window, he saw someone.
Then they were *gone.*
Ana's voice interrupted his thoughts.
ENRIQUE! COME TOUCH THE STONE!

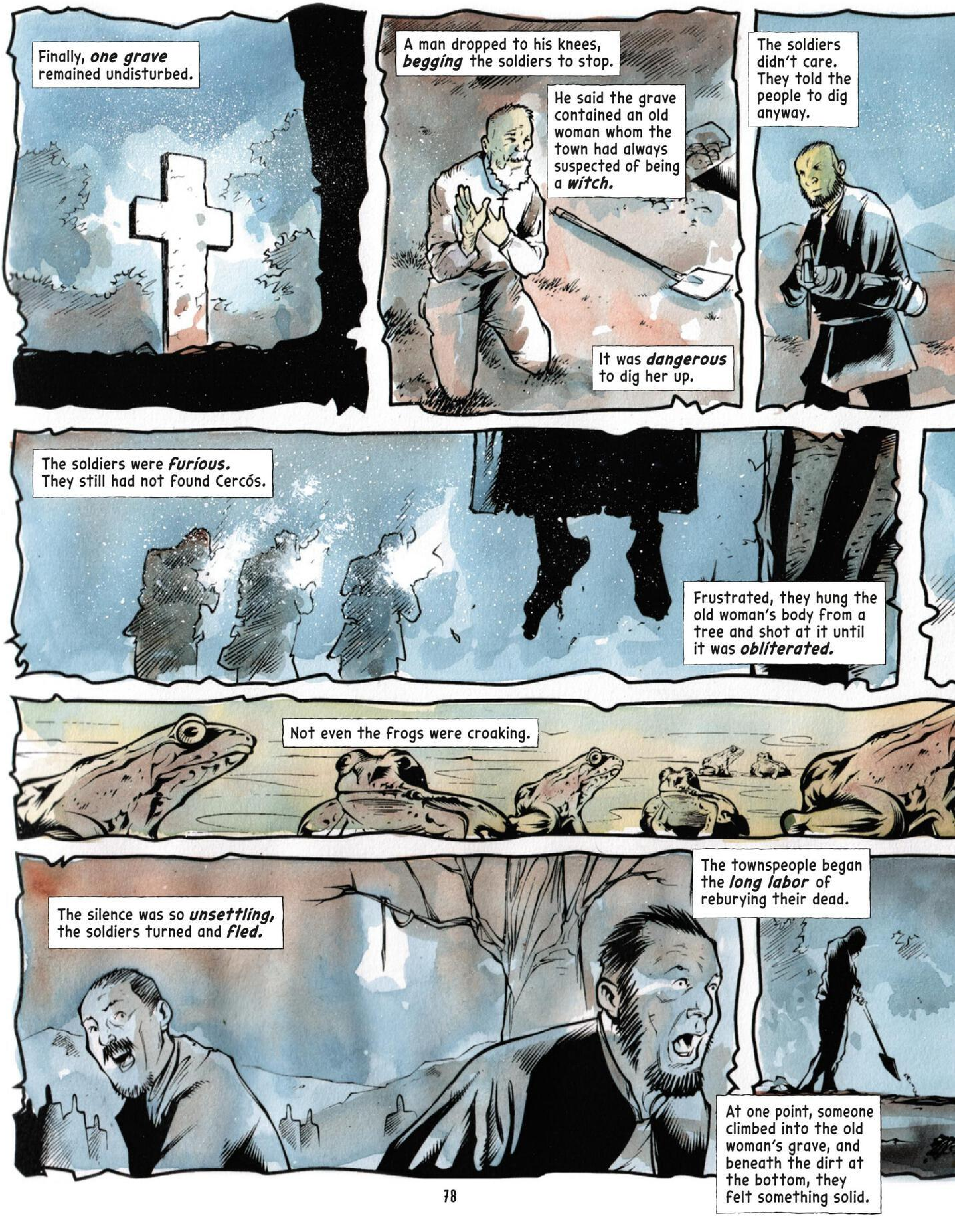

Enrique told himself the *figure* in the church window had probably been nothing.
A trick of the light, or maybe he just *imagined* it.
Still, he didn't want to touch the stone.
But he knew the others would tease him until he did.
The instant he put his hand on it...
...*everything* seemed to change.
The air around him got *cooler,* and the stone started to feel *warm.*
He had a feeling like he could stay and touch this warm stone for *hours...*
...like it was *pulling* him in.

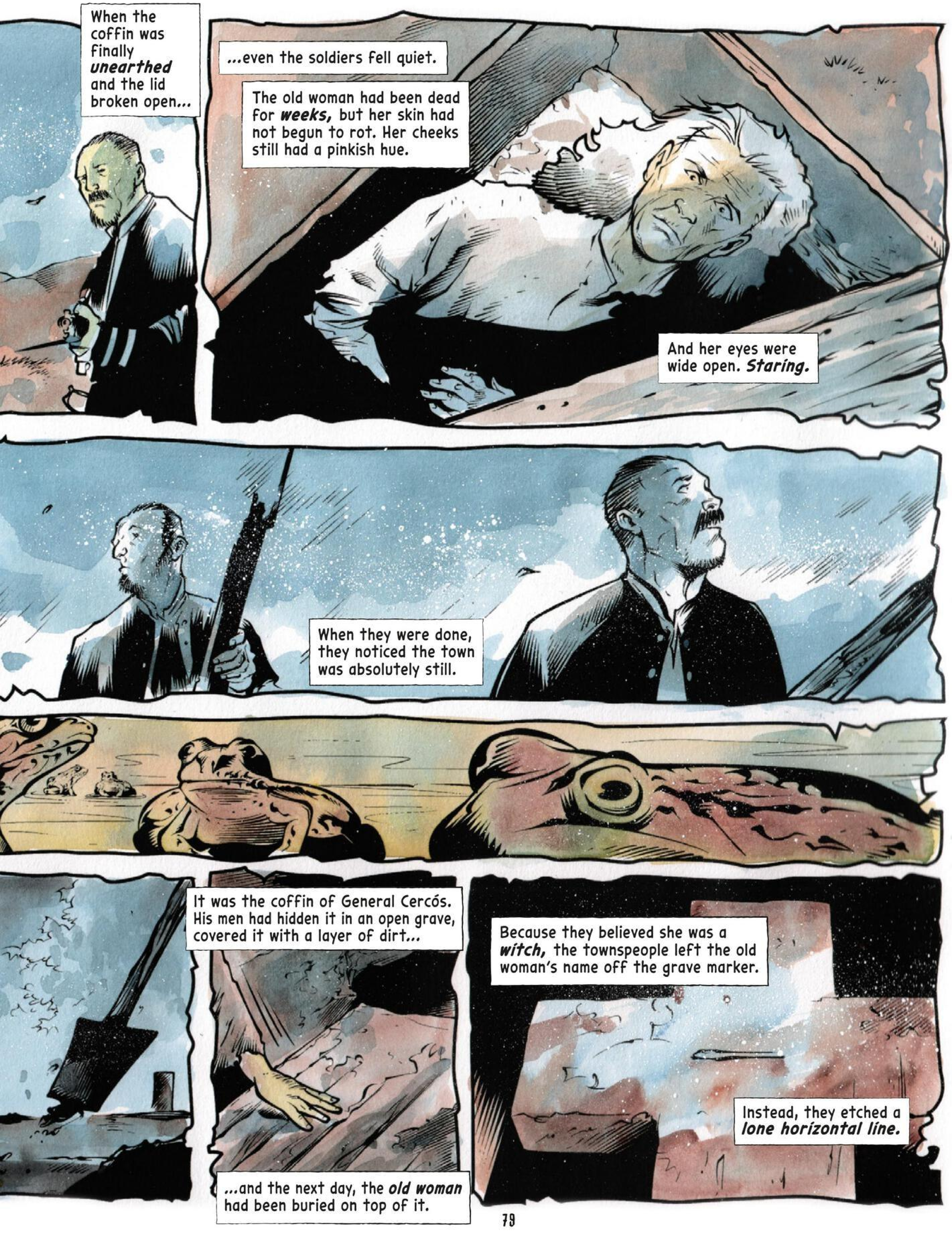

JORGE, WE SHOULDN'T BE MESSING WITH EVIL SPIRITS.
DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT, SOFIA.
LET'S DO MORE EXPLORING!
Enrique was relieved the others didn't go into the church.
After seeing...whatever it was he saw in the window, he didn't want to go inside that decrepit building.
But when he reached the church, he started to get the *same feeling* he had when he touched the Sis Stone.
He was *drawn* to it.
Inside, he saw marks on the floor where the rows of pews must have been.
And the outline of the pulpit where the priest must have led mass.
Enrique wished he was back with his friends.
He *tried* to move, but he couldn't.
The croaking of the frogs grew *louder...*
COME ON, ENRIQUE!
YOU'RE MISSING OUT!

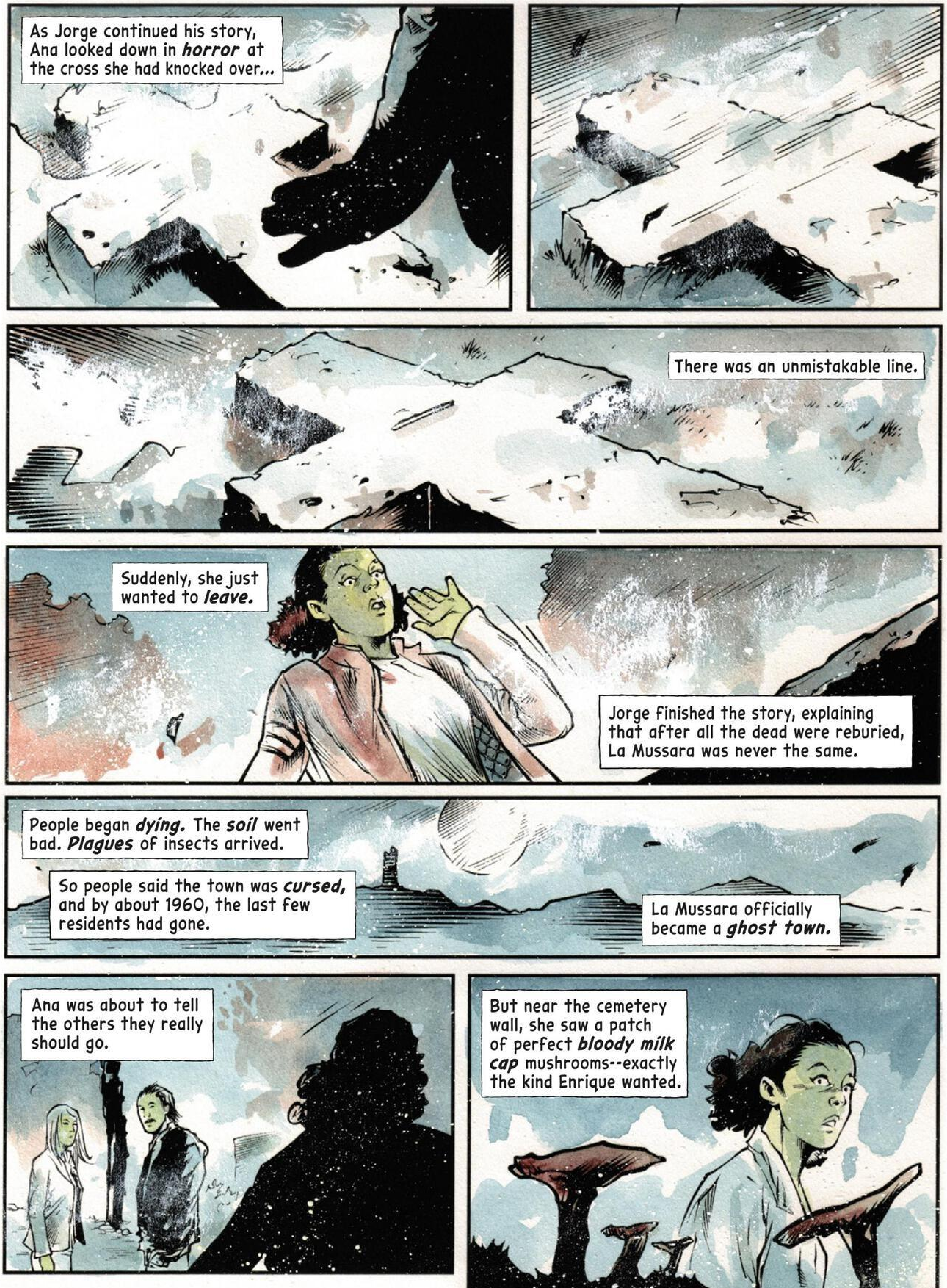

"WE'RE IN THE CEMETERY."
Large stone walls surrounded the cemetery's overgrown graves.
It was like the residents of the town had been *incredibly protective* of their dead.
Ana backed up and accidentally hit an old stone cross--
TRAAK
THUMP
WATCH OUT. THERE ARE *RESTLESS SPIRITS.*
JORGE... DO YOU *REALLY* THINK THIS PLACE IS *HAUNTED?*
HEH HEH.
MAYBE.
Then Jorge began telling the *story* of La Mussara...

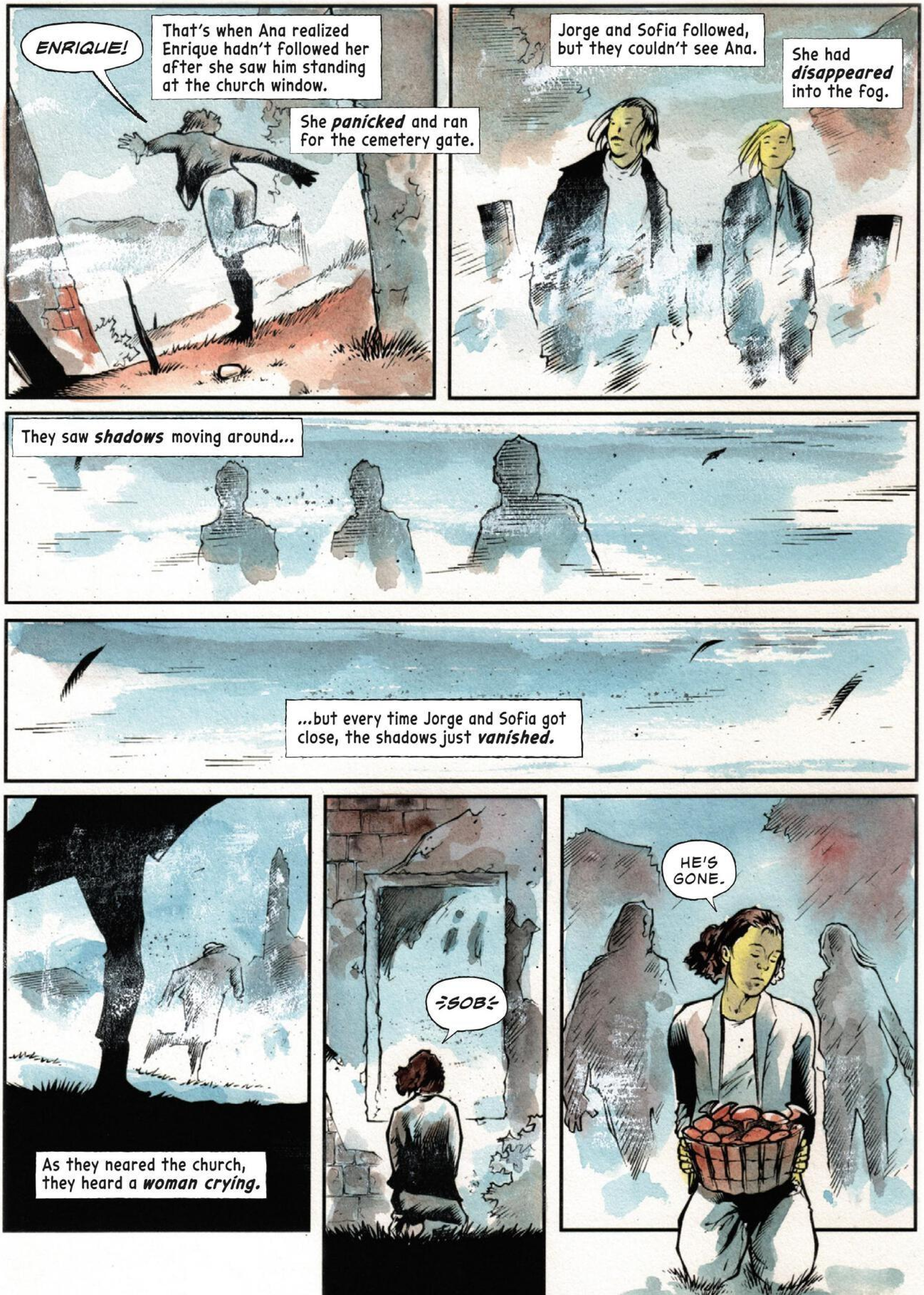

October 1873
A civil war once raged around La Mussara, and a famous general named ***Cercós*** was shot in battle and died in a nearby cave.
Cercós was a beloved leader, and his men wanted to honor him with a proper burial.
But they knew they had to keep his death quiet, or it would crush morale and give their enemies an even bigger victory.
There, they buried him in secret.
Weeks later, ***rival soldiers*** arrived at La Mussara.
They were looking for General Cercós, who they heard was hiding in the town.
They carried torches and ***burst*** into every house and building, ***screaming*** at residents to reveal where Cercós was.
Finally, an elderly man told the soldiers they were ***too late.***

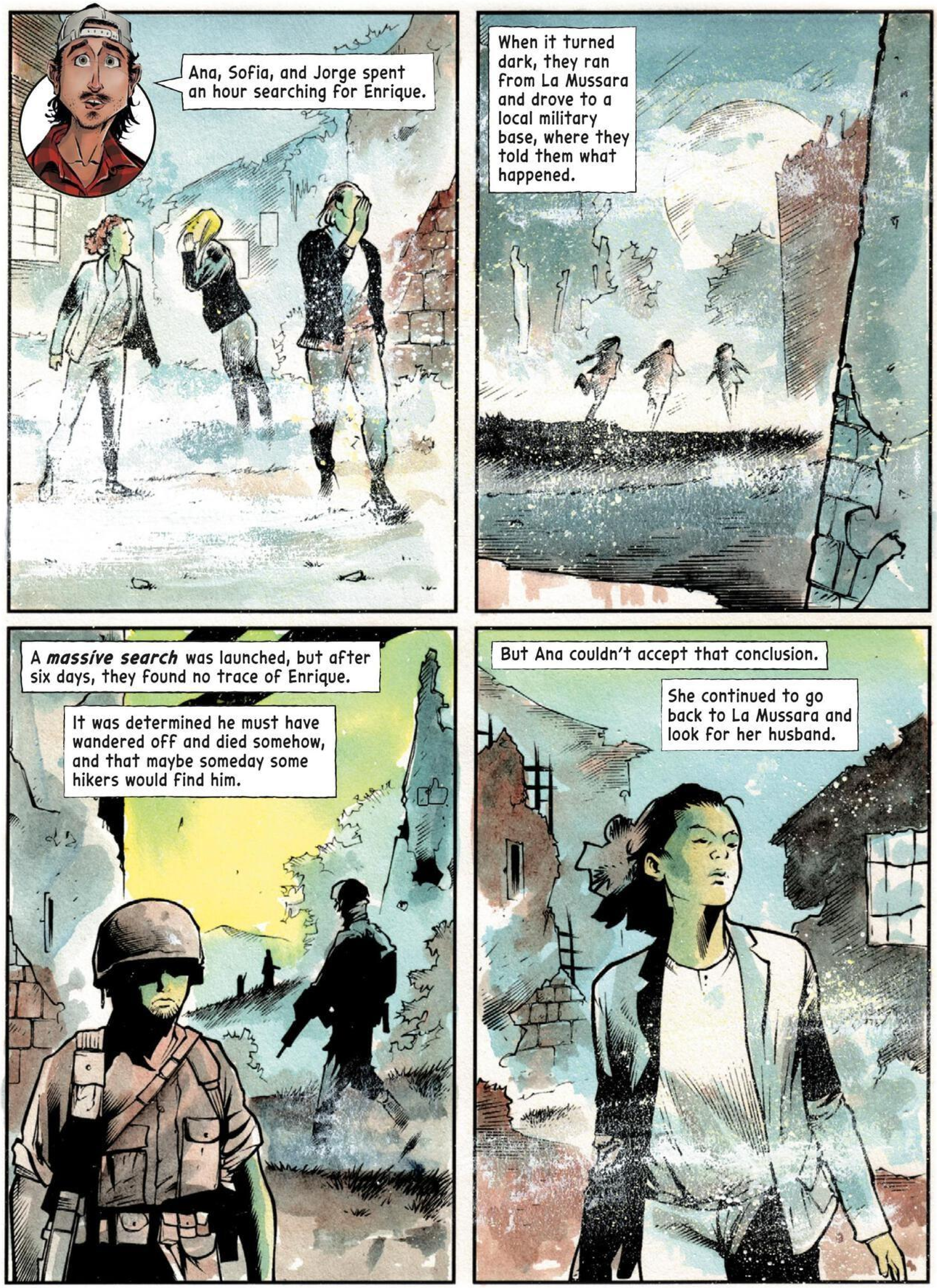

So they waited until the *early-morning hours* before carrying him up the long, foggy trail to La Mussara's cemetery.
The general was already *dead,* and he had been buried in the cemetery.
Because Cercós had been buried in secret, the townspeople didn't know which *grave* was his...
...so the soldiers forced the townspeople to *dig up* their neighbors and loved ones grave by grave.
All the while, the croaking of the *frogs* in the nearby pond grew louder.

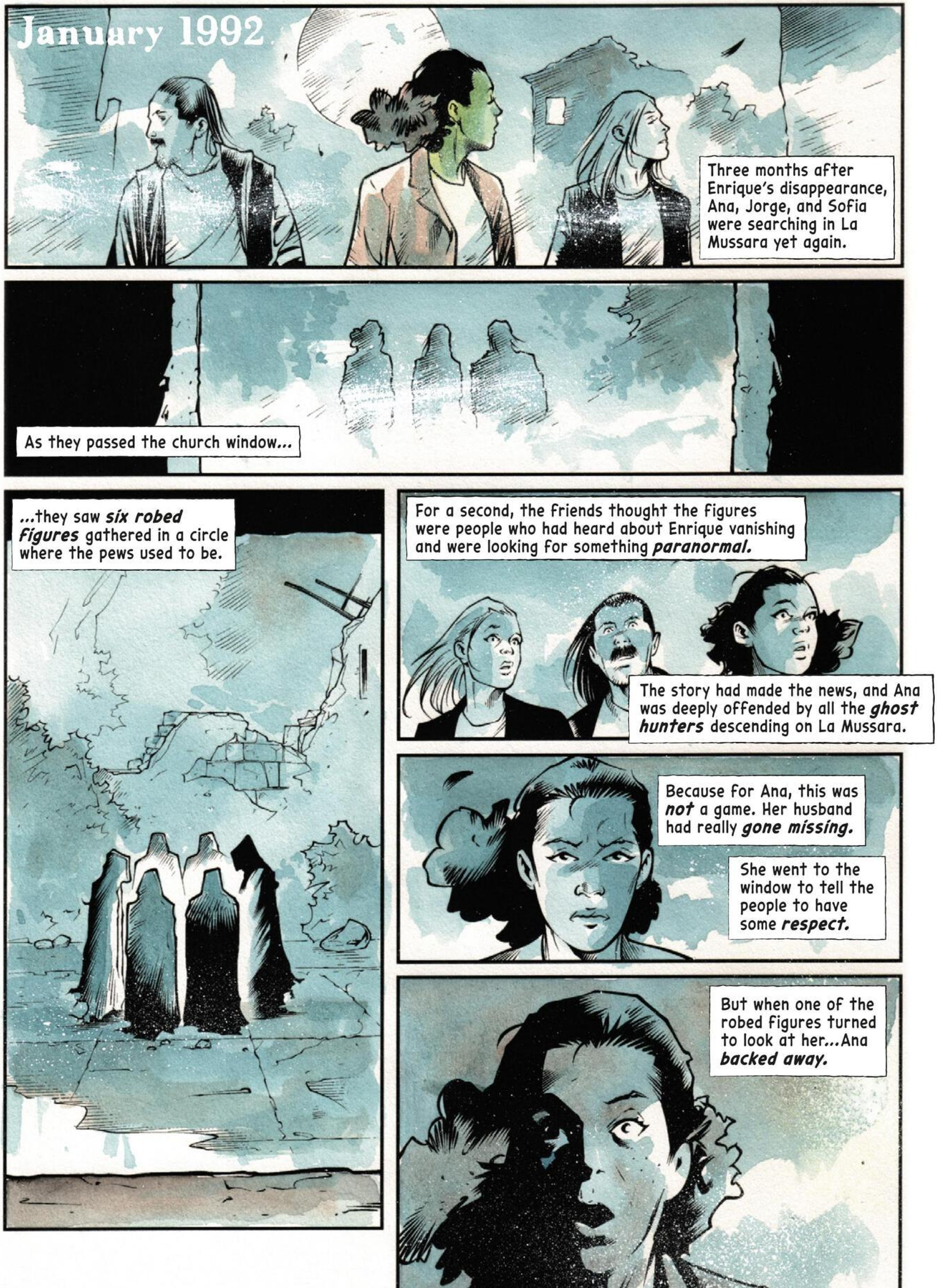

Finally, ***one grave*** remained undisturbed.
A man dropped to his knees, ***begging*** the soldiers to stop.
He said the grave contained an old woman whom the town had always suspected of being a ***witch.***
It was ***dangerous*** to dig her up.
The soldiers didn't care. They told the people to dig anyway.
The soldiers were ***furious.*** They still had not found Cercós.
Frustrated, they hung the old woman's body from a tree and shot at it until it was ***obliterated.***
Not even the frogs were croaking.
The silence was so ***unsettling,*** the soldiers turned and ***fled.***
The townspeople began the ***long labor*** of reburying their dead.
At one point, someone climbed into the old woman's grave, and beneath the dirt at the bottom, they felt something solid.

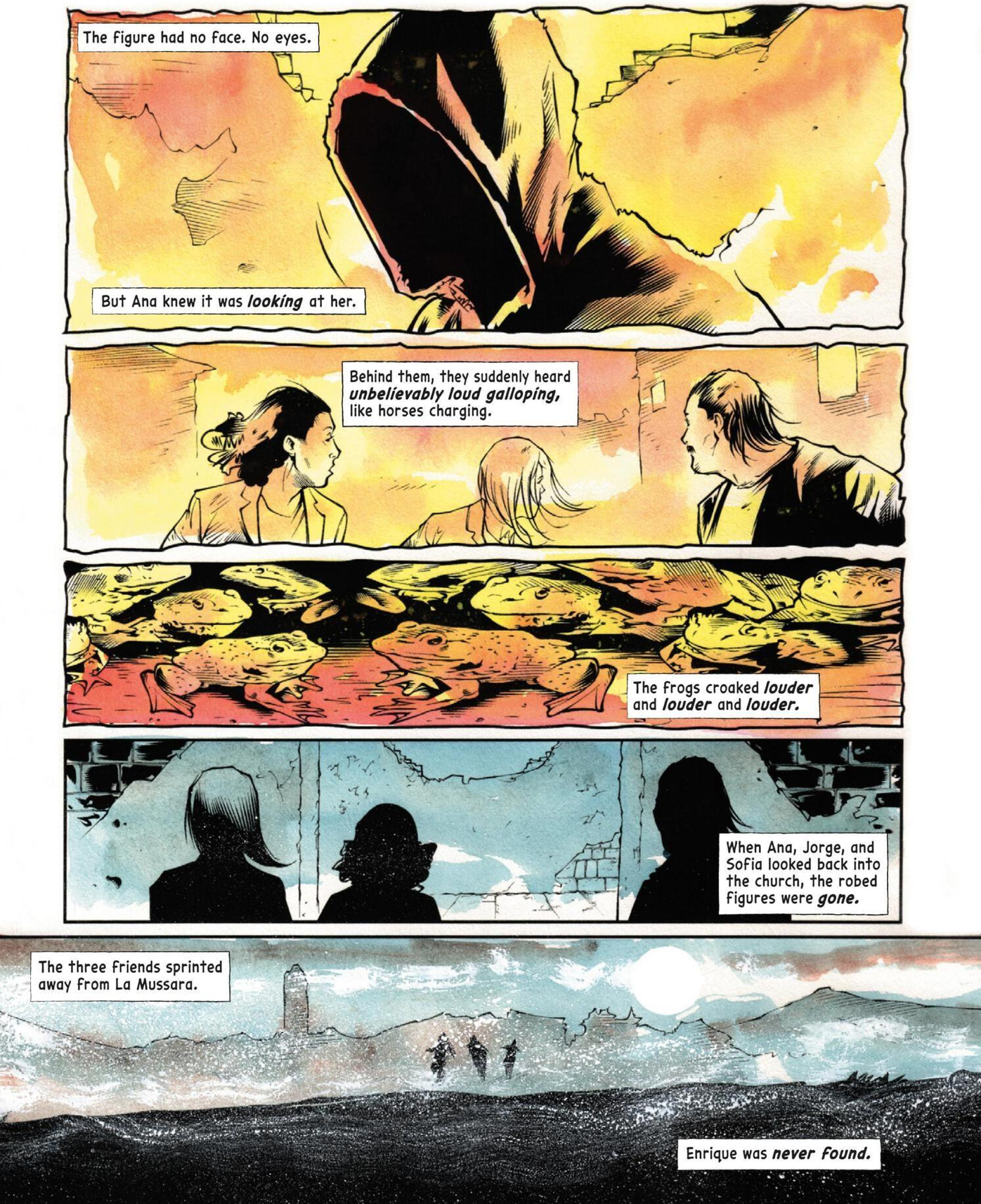

When the coffin was finally ***unearthed*** and the lid broken open...
...even the soldiers fell quiet.
The old woman had been dead for ***weeks,*** but her skin had not begun to rot. Her cheeks still had a pinkish hue.
And her eyes were wide open. ***Staring.***
When they were done, they noticed the town was absolutely still.
It was the coffin of General Cercós. His men had hidden it in an open grave, covered it with a layer of dirt...
...and the next day, the *old woman* had been buried on top of it.
Because they believed she was a ***witch,*** the townspeople left the old woman's name off the grave marker.
Instead, they etched a ***lone horizontal line.***


As Jorge continued his story, Ana looked down in *horror* at the cross she had knocked over...
There was an unmistakable line.
Suddenly, she just wanted to *leave.*
Jorge finished the story, explaining that after all the dead were reburied, La Mussara was never the same.
People began *dying.* The *soil* went bad. *Plagues* of insects arrived.
So people said the town was *cursed,* and by about 1960, the last few residents had gone.
La Mussara officially became a *ghost town.*
Ana was about to tell the others they really should go.
But near the cemetery wall, she saw a patch of perfect *bloody milk cap* mushrooms--exactly the kind Enrique wanted.

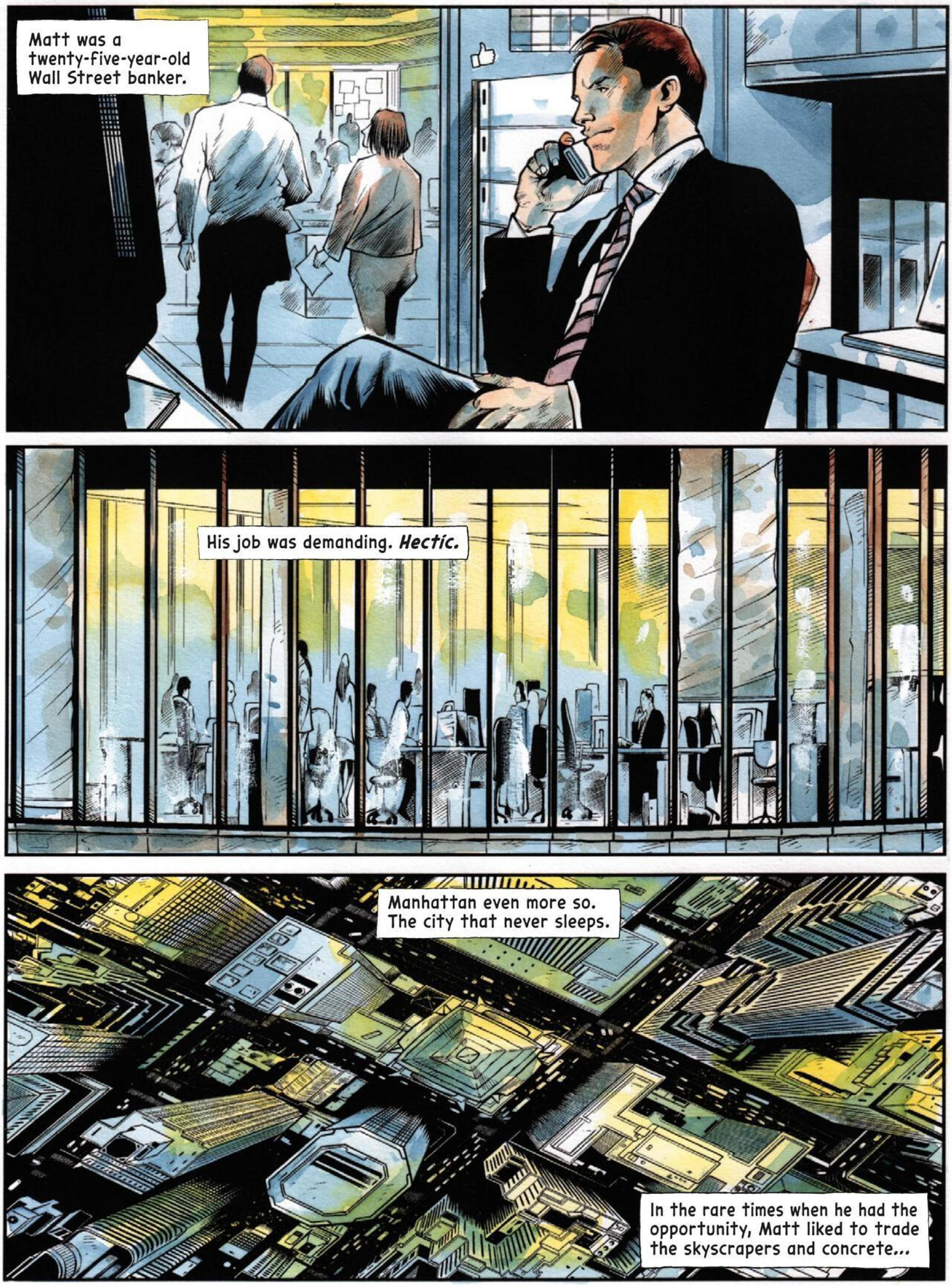

ENRIQUE!
That's when Ana realized Enrique hadn't followed her after she saw him standing at the church window.
She *panicked* and ran for the cemetery gate.
Jorge and Sofia followed, but they couldn't see Ana.
She had *disappeared* into the fog.
They saw *shadows* moving around...
...but every time Jorge and Sofia got close, the shadows just *vanished.*
As they neared the church, they heard a *woman crying.*
SOB
HE'S GONE.

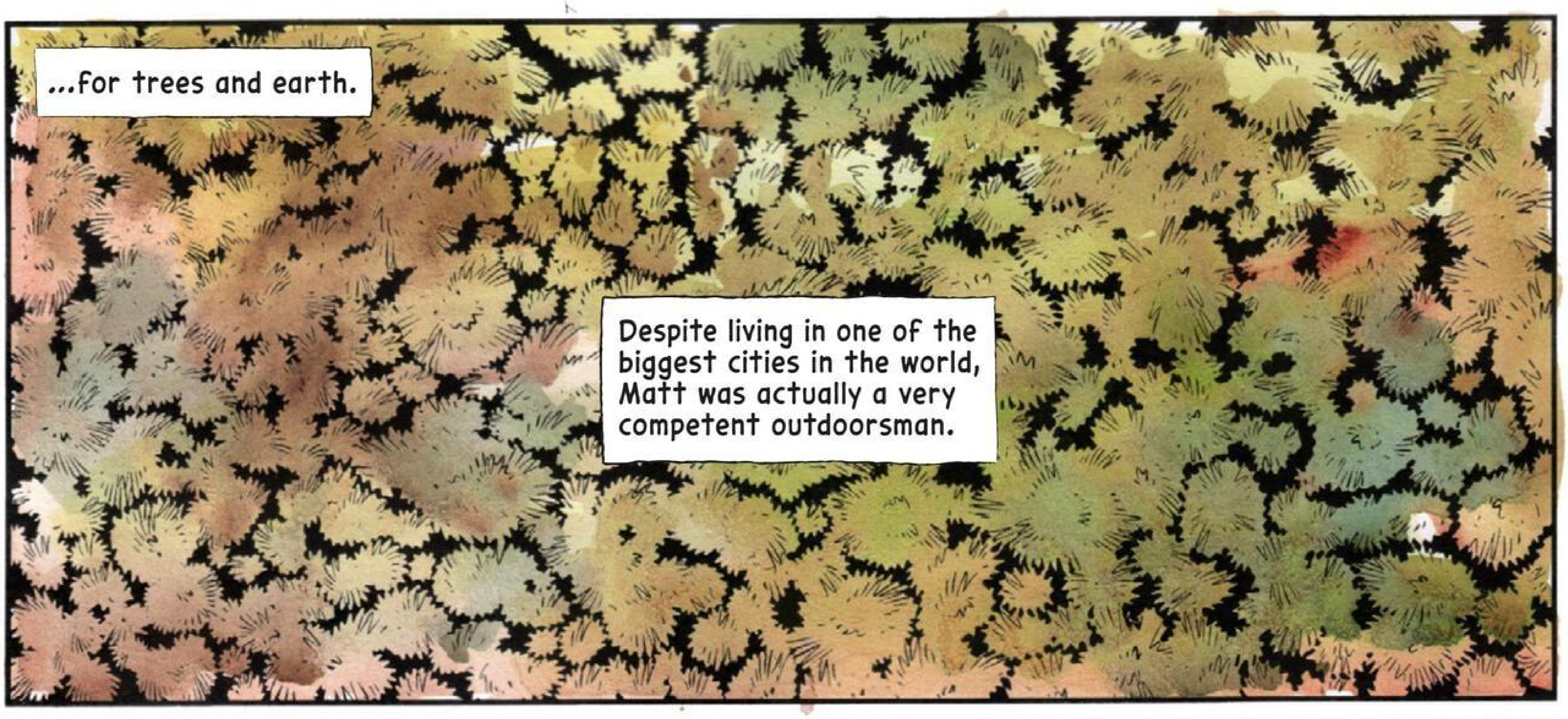

Ana, Sofia, and Jorge spent an hour searching for Enrique.
When it turned dark, they ran from La Mussara and drove to a local military base, where they told them what happened.
A *massive search* was launched, but after six days, they found no trace of Enrique.
It was determined he must have wandered off and died somehow, and that maybe someday some hikers would find him.
But Ana couldn't accept that conclusion.
She continued to go back to La Mussara and look for her husband.

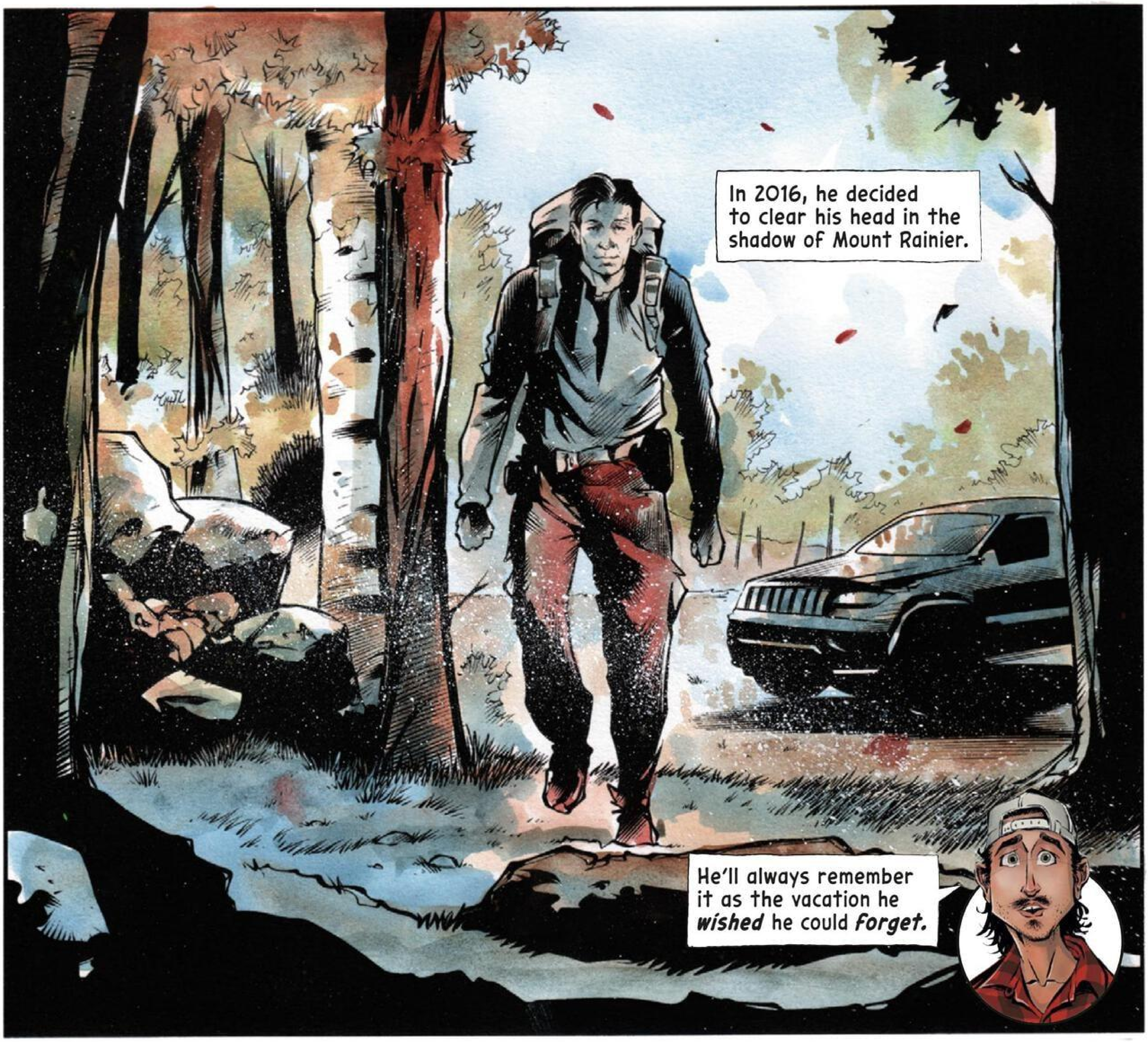

January 1992
Three months after Enrique's disappearance, Ana, Jorge, and Sofia were searching in La Mussara yet again.
As they passed the church window...
...they saw *six robed figures* gathered in a circle where the pews used to be.
For a second, the friends thought the figures were people who had heard about Enrique vanishing and were looking for something *paranormal.*
The story had made the news, and Ana was deeply offended by all the *ghost hunters* descending on La Mussara.
Because for Ana, this was *not* a game. Her husband had really *gone missing.*
She went to the window to tell the people to have some *respect.*
But when one of the robed figures turned to look at her...Ana *backed away.*

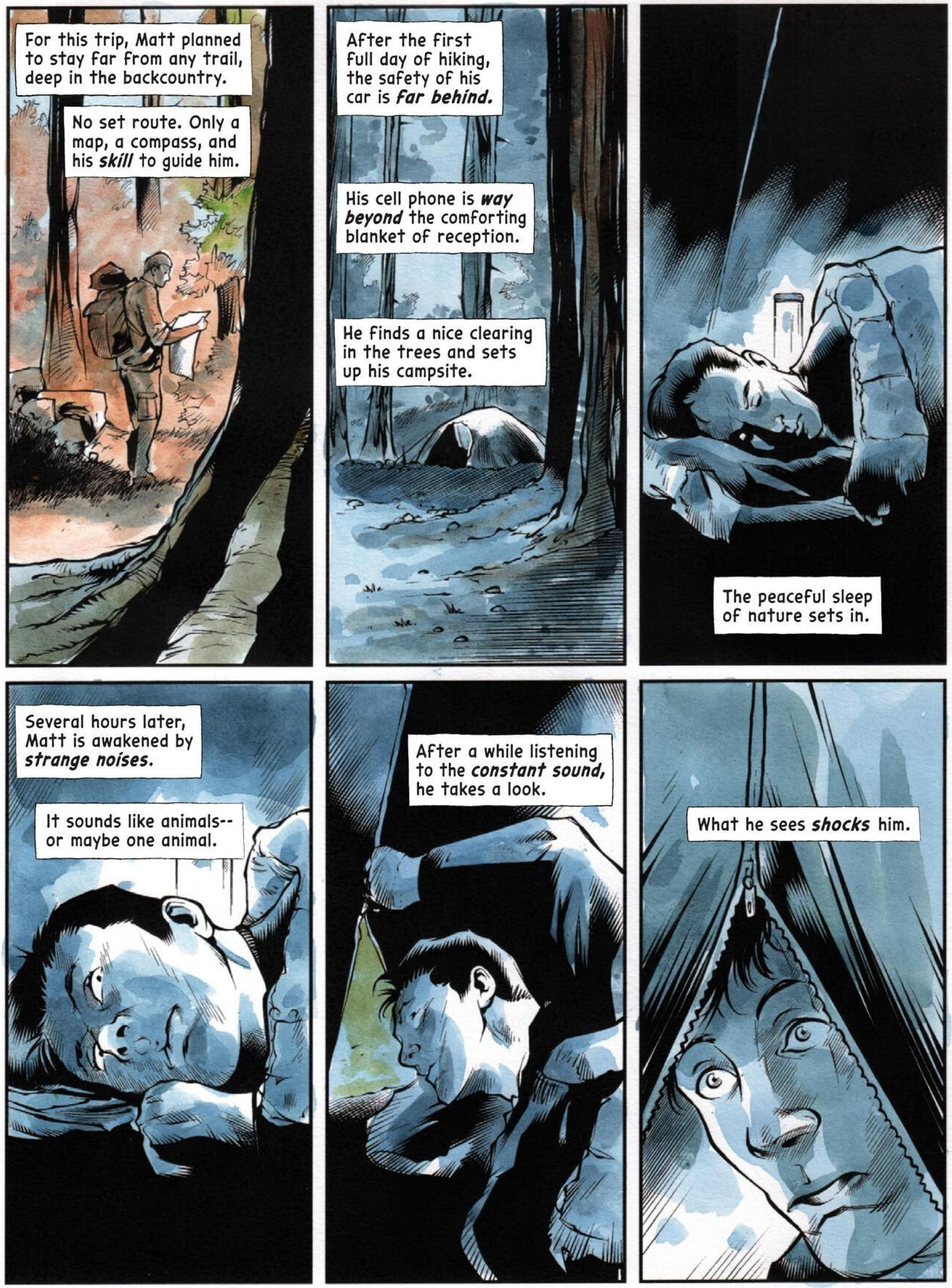

The figure had no face. No eyes.
But Ana knew it was *looking* at her.
Behind them, they suddenly heard ***unbelievably loud galloping,*** like horses charging.
The frogs croaked ***louder*** and ***louder*** and ***louder.***
When Ana, Jorge, and Sofia looked back into the church, the robed figures were ***gone.***
The three friends sprinted away from La Mussara.
Enrique was ***never found.***

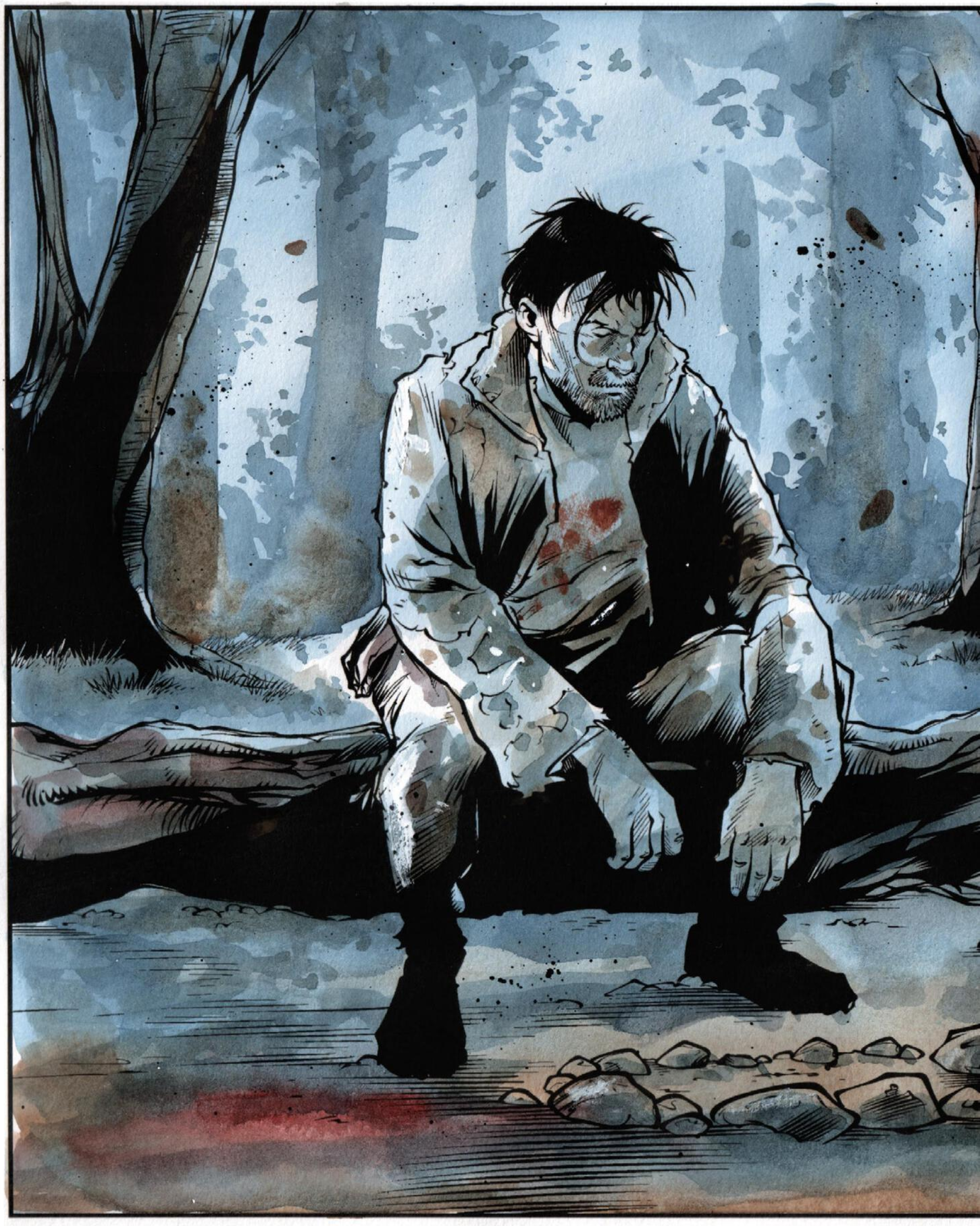
BELLS CANYON

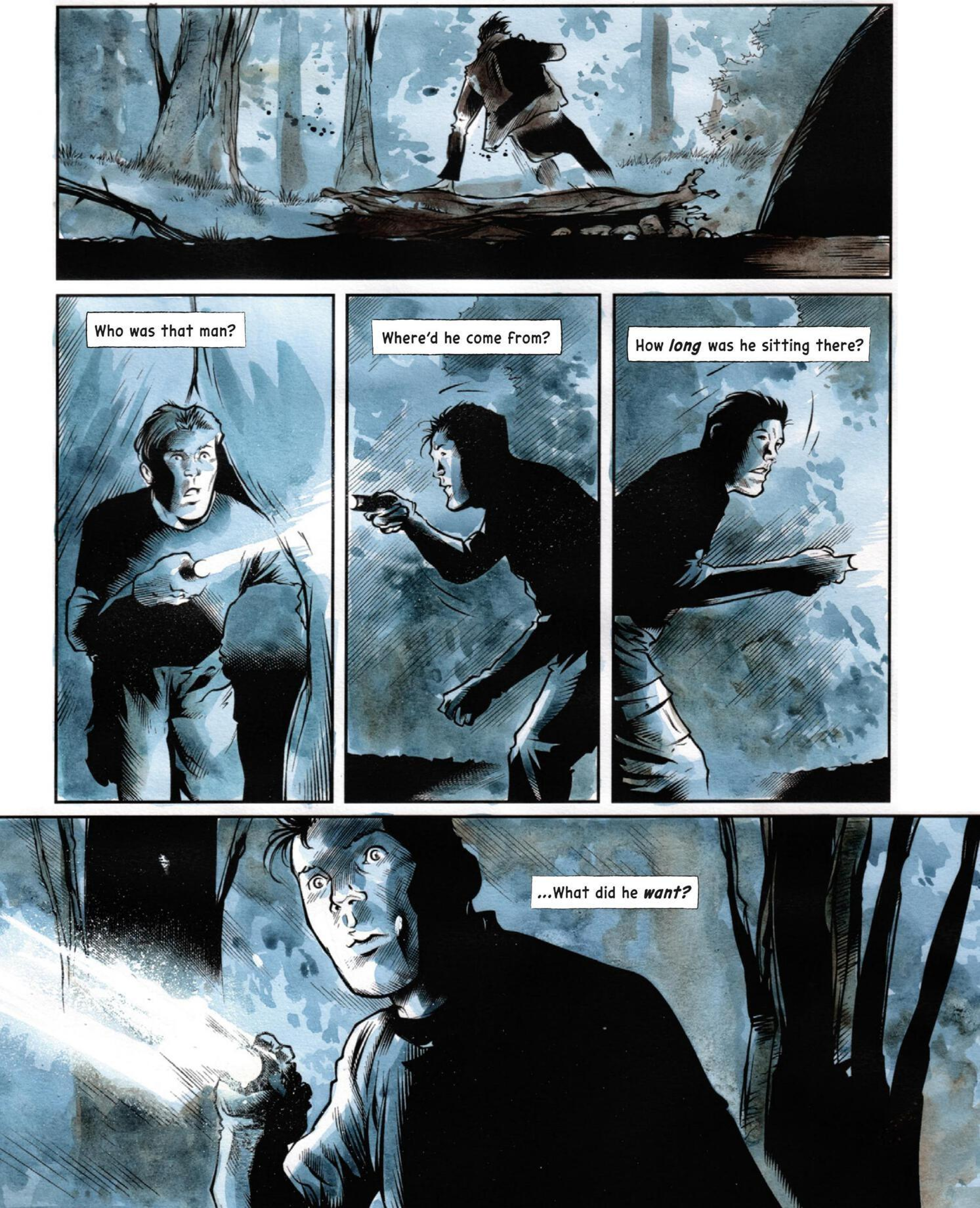

Matt was a twenty-five-year-old Wall Street banker.
His job was demanding. *Hectic.*
Manhattan even more so. The city that never sleeps.
In the rare times when he had the opportunity, Matt liked to trade the skyscrapers and concrete...

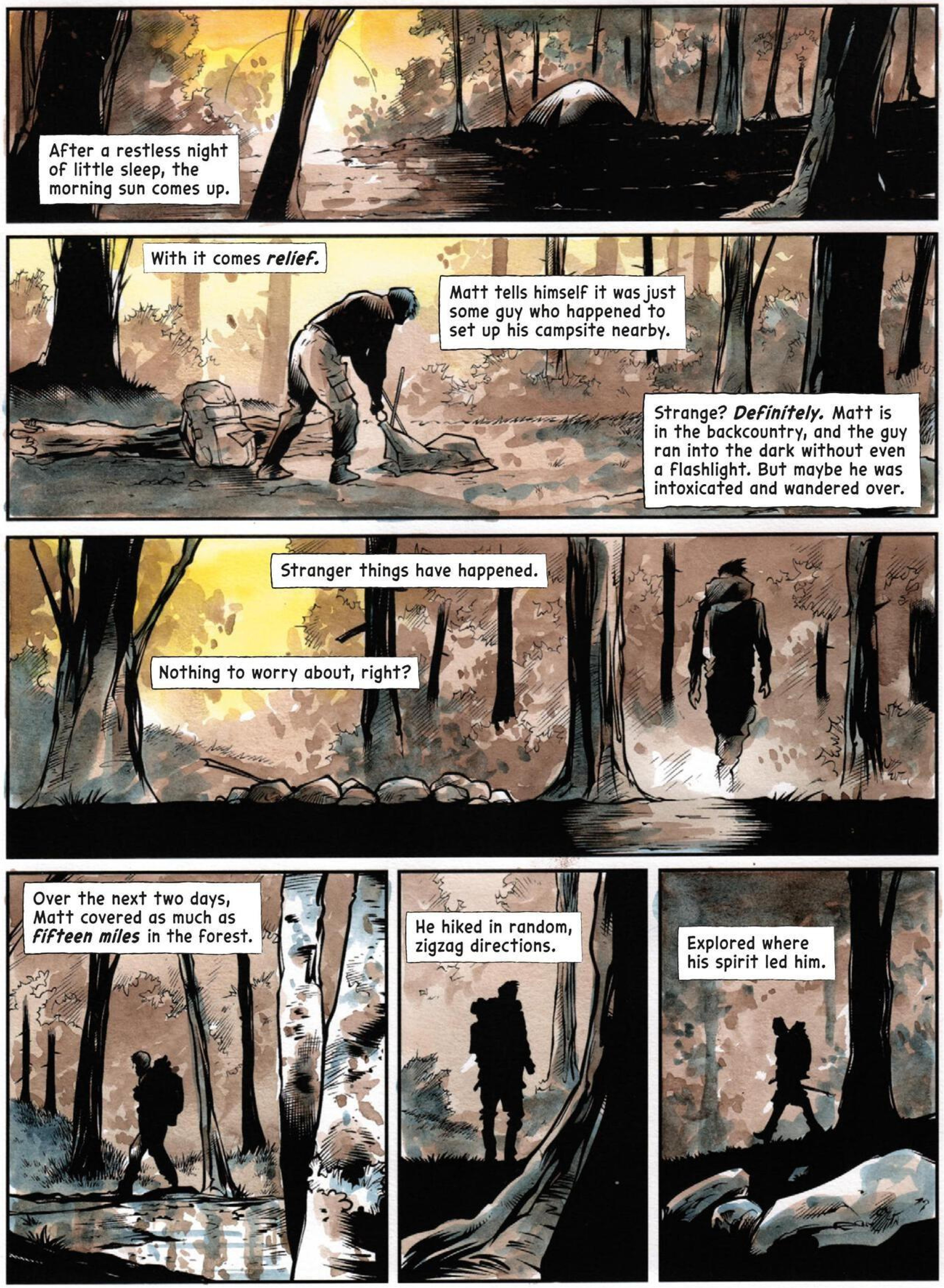

...for trees and earth.
Despite living in one of the biggest cities in the world, Matt was actually a very competent outdoorsman.

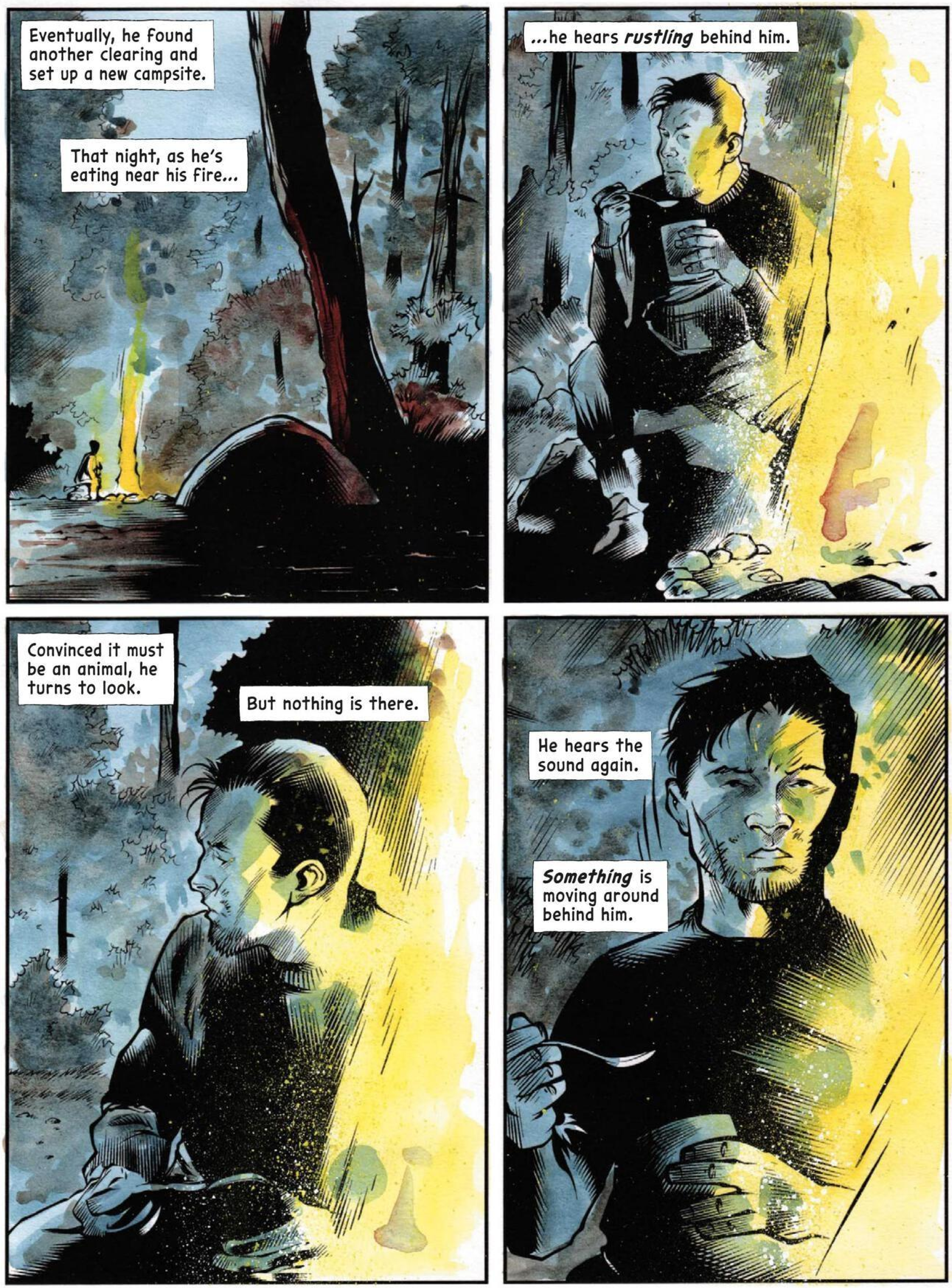

In 2016, he decided to clear his head in the shadow of Mount Rainier.
He'll always remember it as the vacation he *wished* he could *forget.*

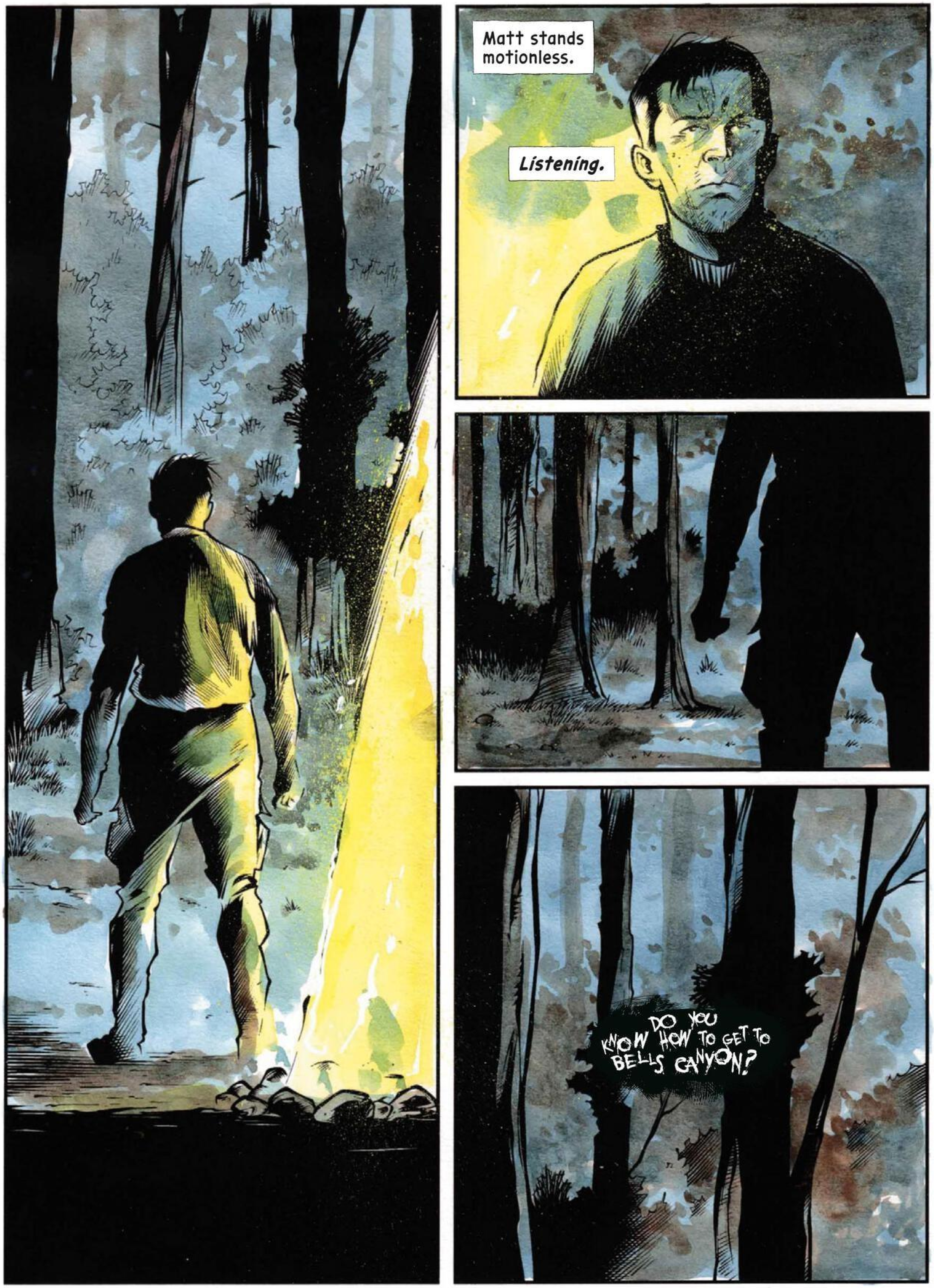

For this trip, Matt planned to stay far from any trail, deep in the backcountry.
No set route. Only a map, a compass, and his *skill* to guide him.
After the first full day of hiking, the safety of his car is ***far behind.***
His cell phone is ***way beyond*** the comforting blanket of reception.
He finds a nice clearing in the trees and sets up his campsite.
The peaceful sleep of nature sets in.
Several hours later, Matt is awakened by ***strange noises.***
It sounds like animals--or maybe one animal.
After a while listening to the ***constant sound,*** he takes a look.
What he sees ***shocks*** him.

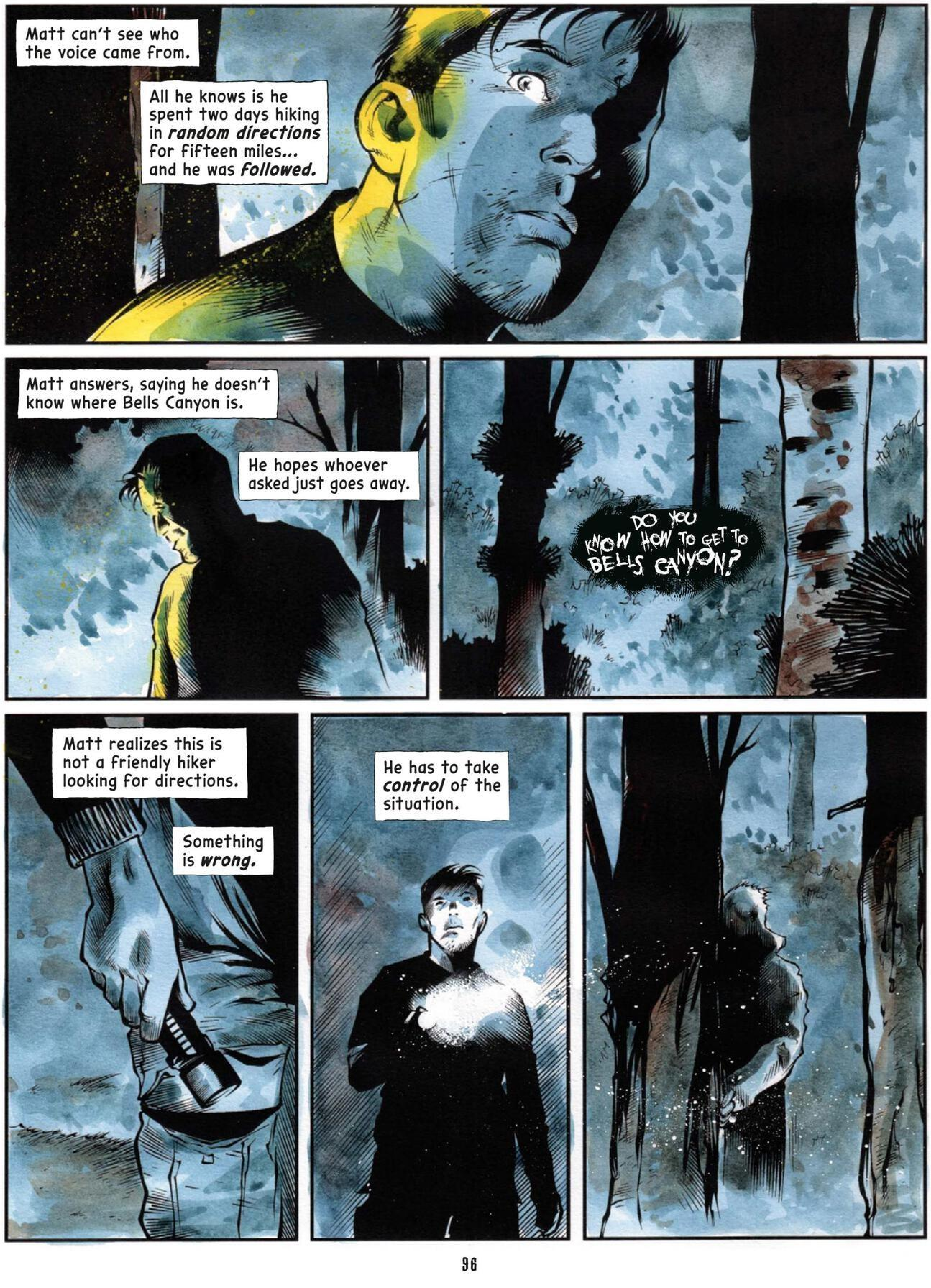


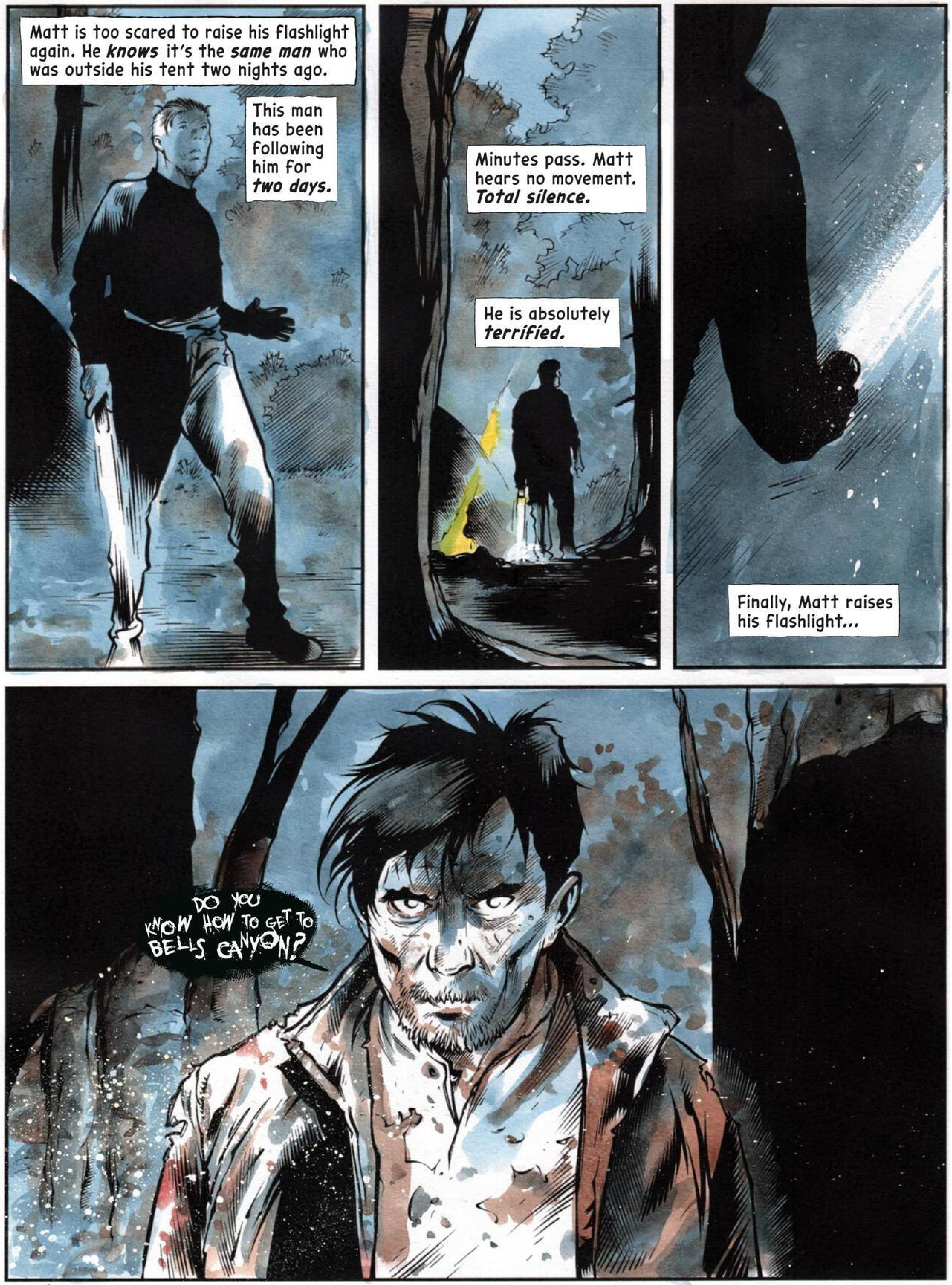

Who was that man?
Where'd he come from?
How *long* was he sitting there?
...What did he *want?*

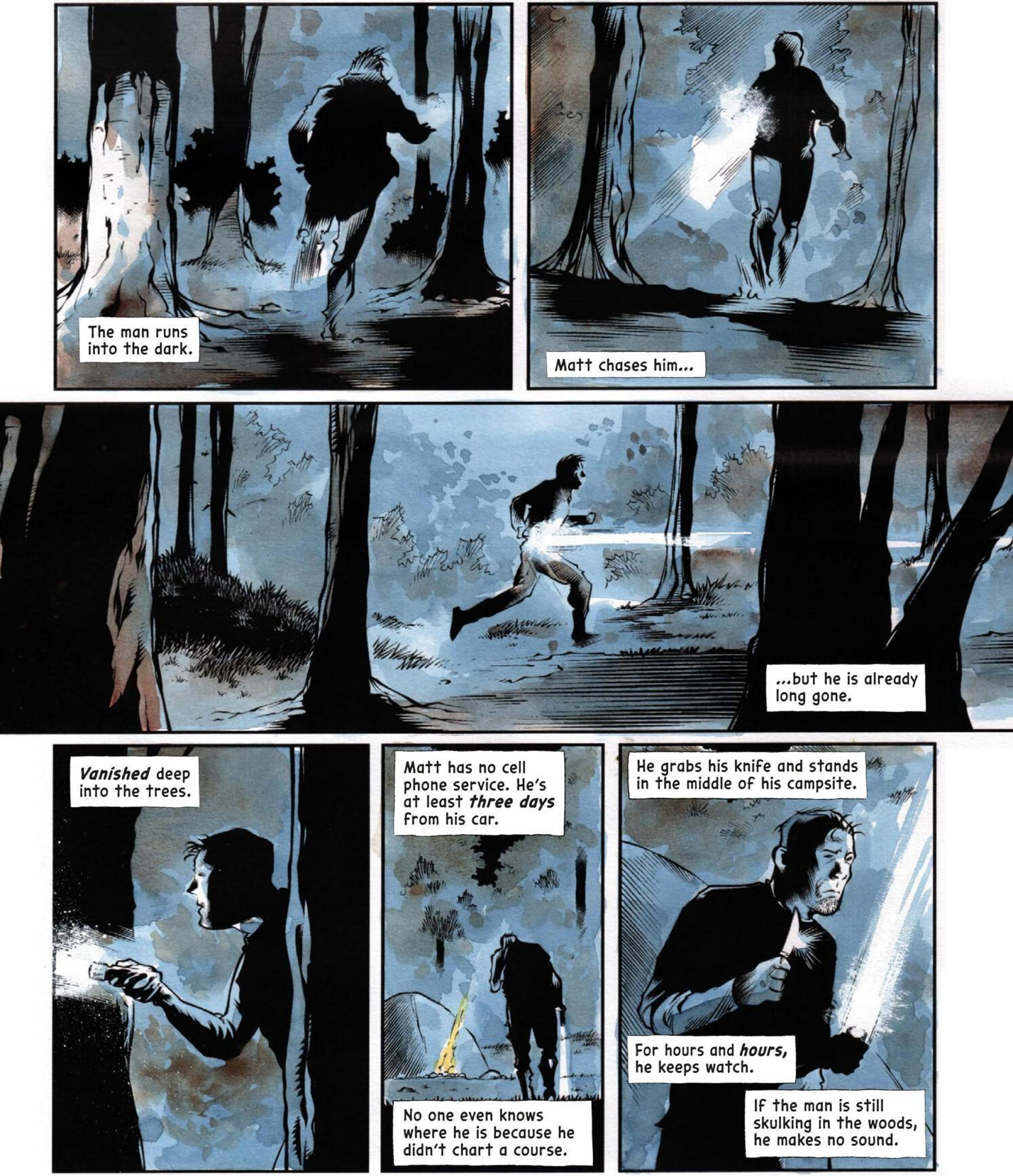

After a restless night of little sleep, the morning sun comes up.
With it comes ***relief.***
Matt tells himself it was just some guy who happened to set up his campsite nearby.
Strange? ***Definitely.*** Matt is in the backcountry, and the guy ran into the dark without even a flashlight. But maybe he was intoxicated and wandered over.
Stranger things have happened.
Nothing to worry about, right?
Over the next two days, Matt covered as much as ***fifteen miles*** in the forest.
He hiked in random, zigzag directions.
Explored where his spirit led him.

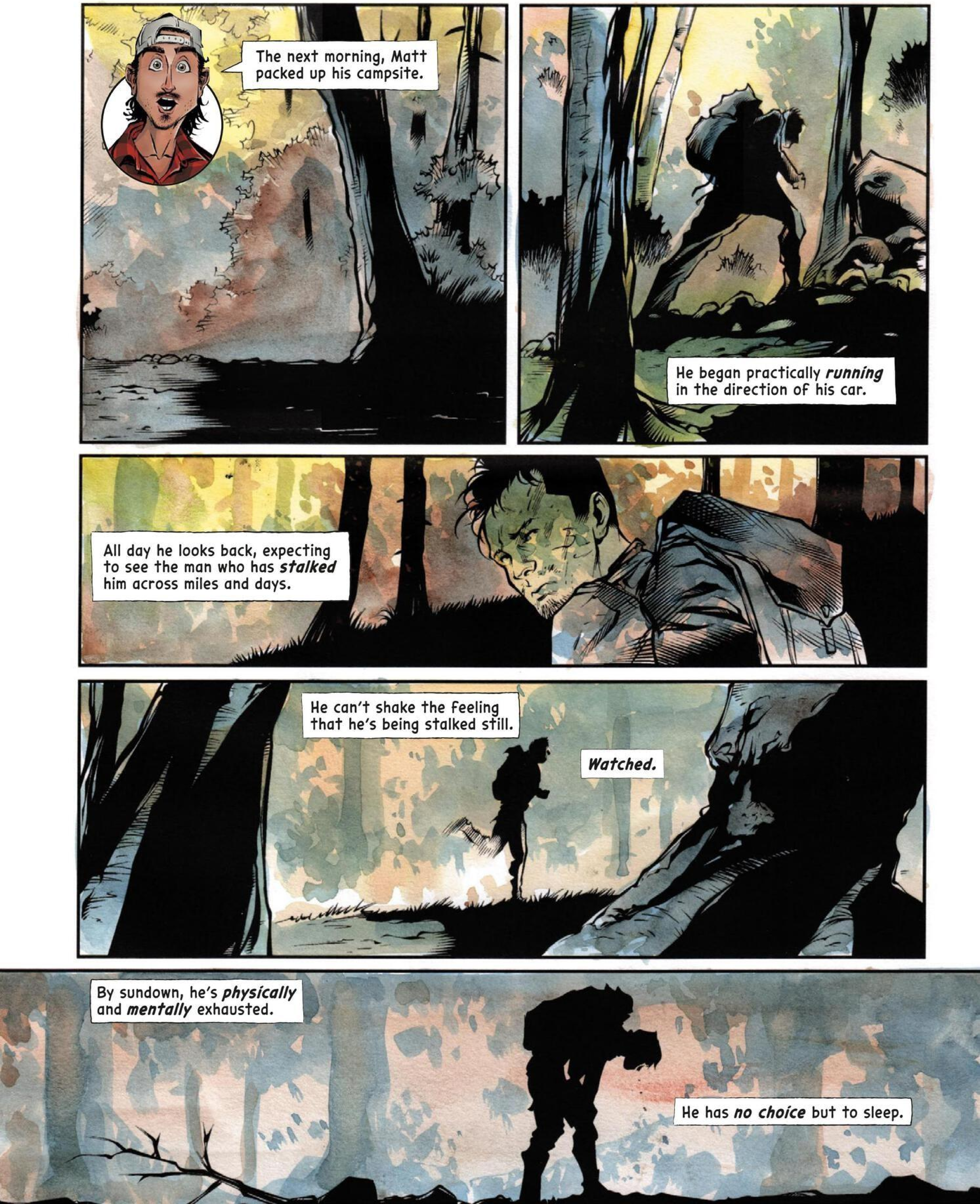

Eventually, he found another clearing and set up a new campsite.
That night, as he's eating near his fire...
...he hears *rustling* behind him.
Convinced it must be an animal, he turns to look.
But nothing is there.
He hears the sound again.
Something is moving around behind him.

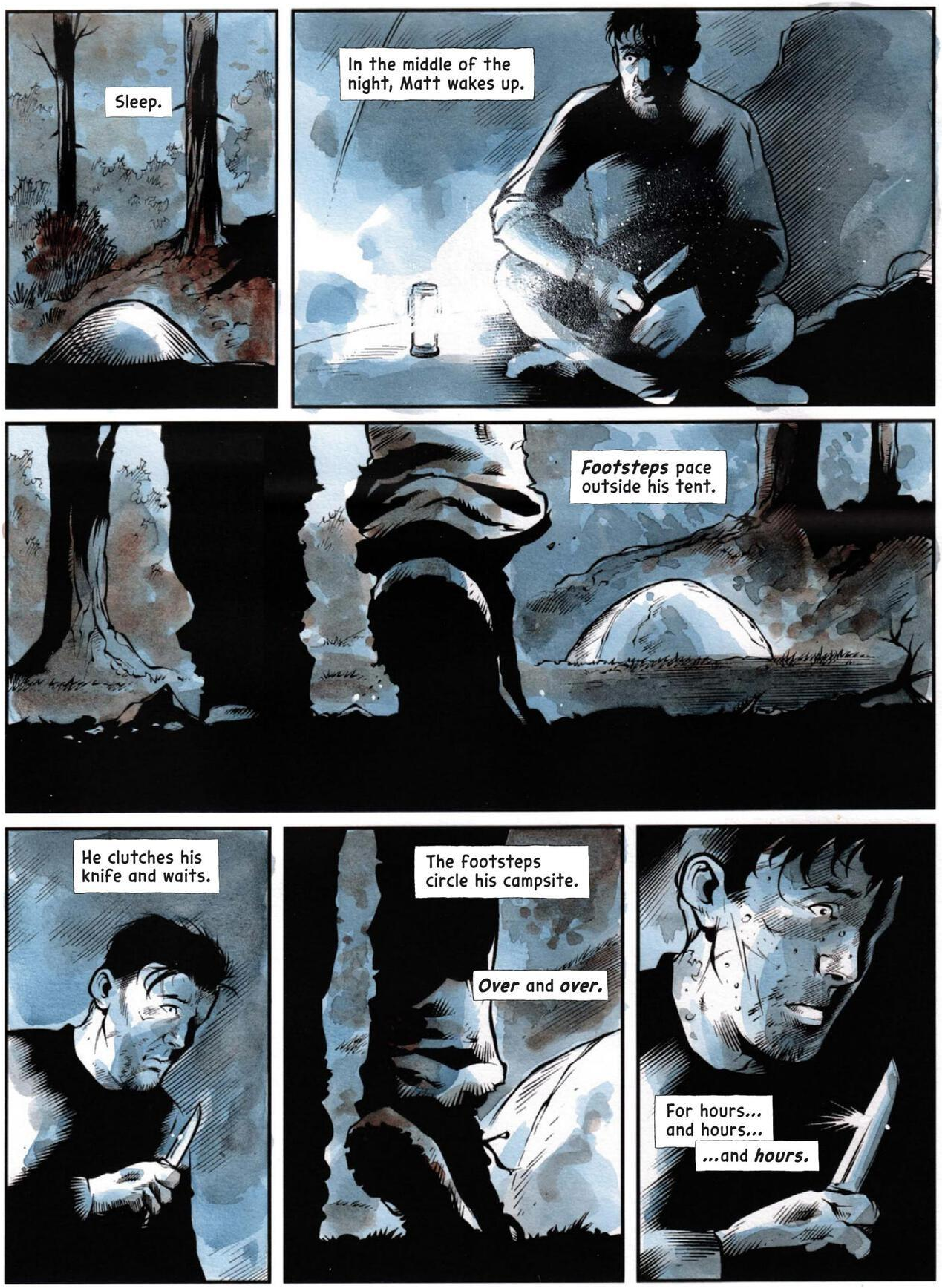

Matt stands motionless.
Listening.
DO YOU KNOW HOW TO GET TO BELLS CANYON?

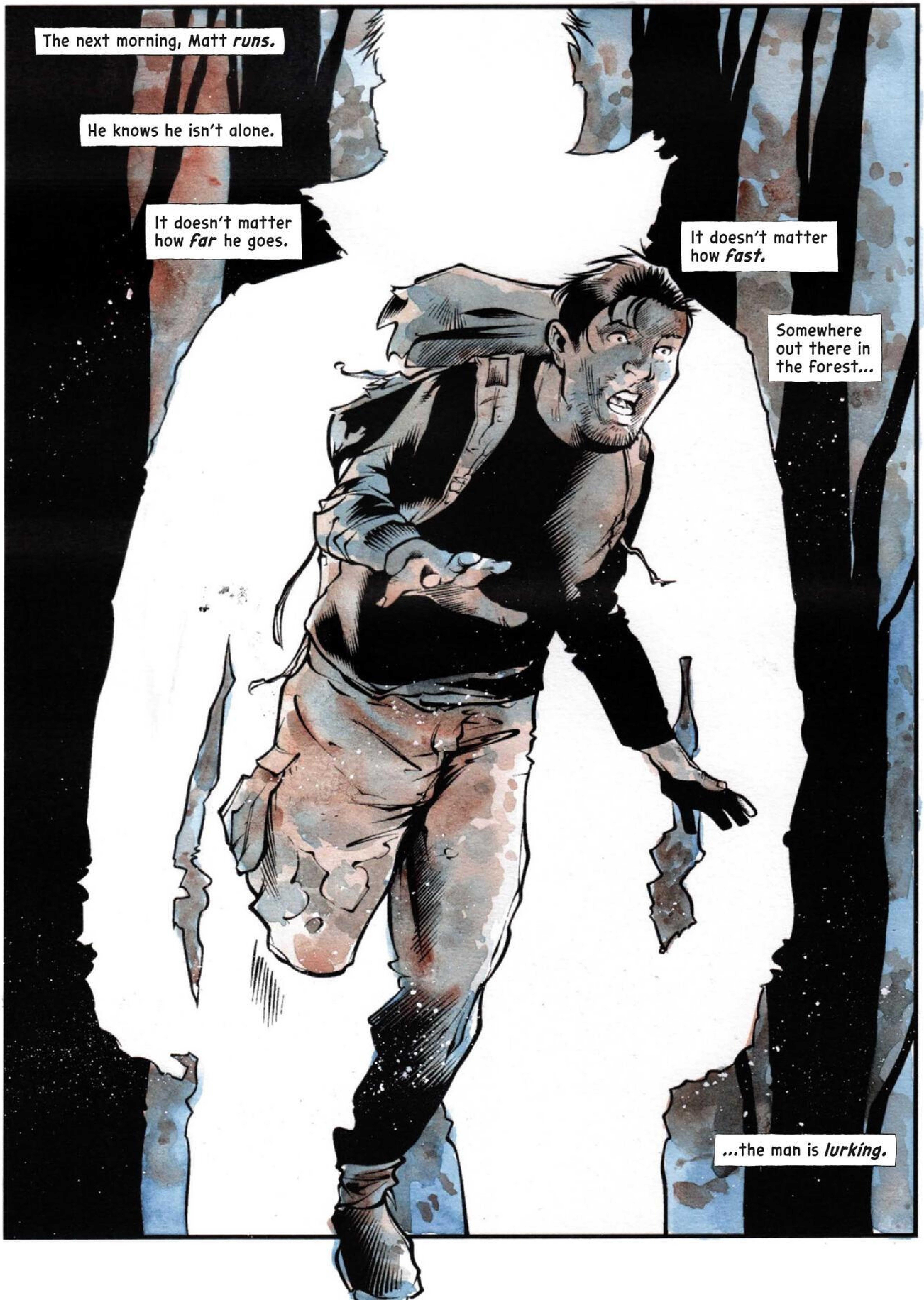

Matt can't see who the voice came from.
All he knows is he spent two days hiking in *random directions* for fifteen miles... and he was *followed.*
Matt answers, saying he doesn't know where Bells Canyon is.
He hopes whoever asked just goes away.
DO YOU KNOW HOW TO GET TO BELLS CANYON?
Matt realizes this is not a friendly hiker looking for directions.
Something is *wrong.*
He has to take *control* of the situation.

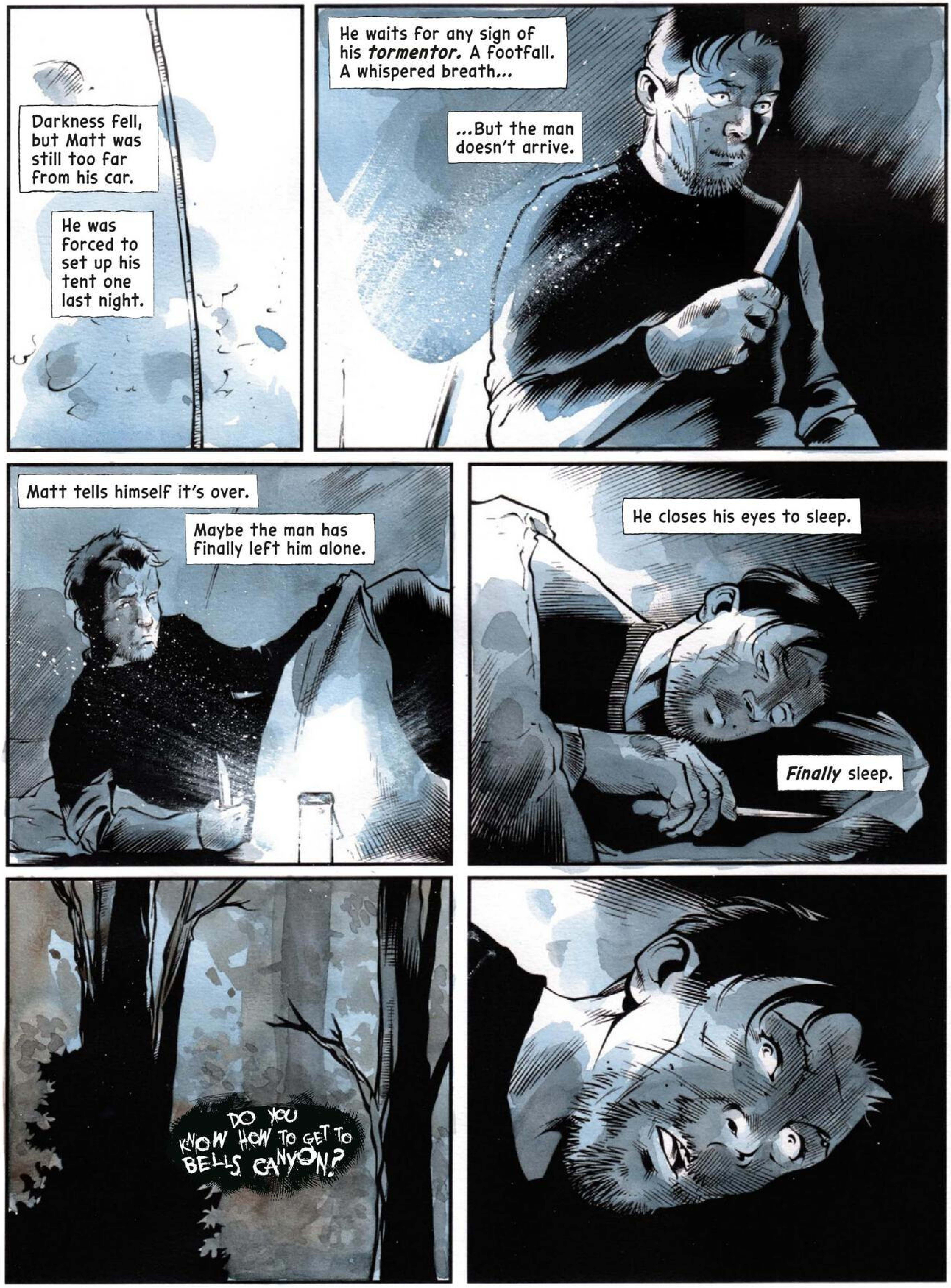

Matt is too scared to raise his flashlight again. He **knows** it's the ***same man*** who was outside his tent two nights ago.
This man has been following him for ***two days.***
Minutes pass. Matt hears no movement. ***Total silence.***
He is absolutely ***terrified.***
Finally, Matt raises his flashlight...
DO YOU KNOW HOW TO GET TO BELLS CANYON?

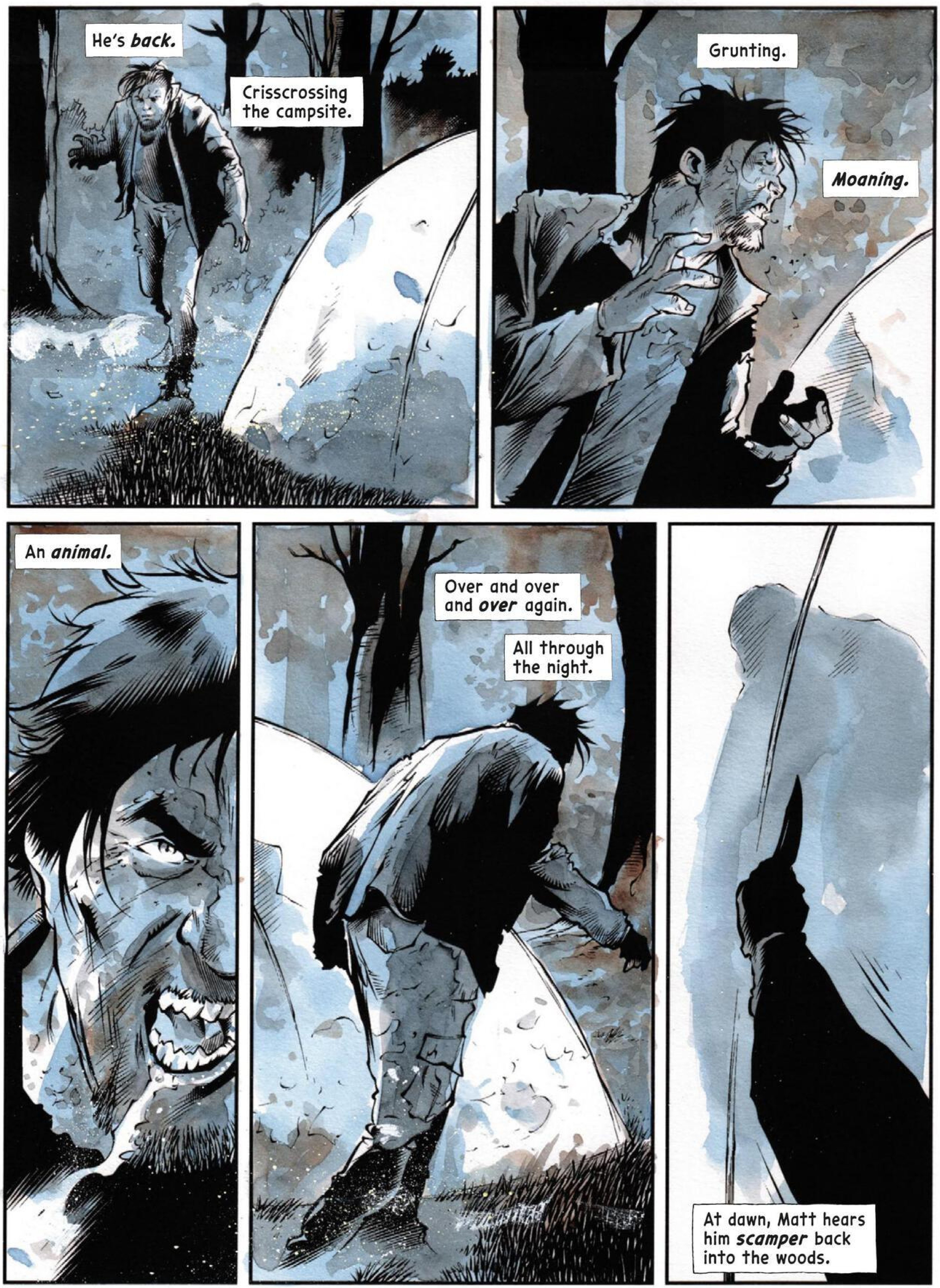

The man runs into the dark.
Matt chases him...
...but he is already long gone.
Vanished deep into the trees.
Matt has no cell phone service. He's at least *three days* from his car.
No one even knows where he is because he didn't chart a course.
He grabs his knife and stands in the middle of his campsite.
For hours and *hours,* he keeps watch.
If the man is still skulking in the woods, he makes no sound.

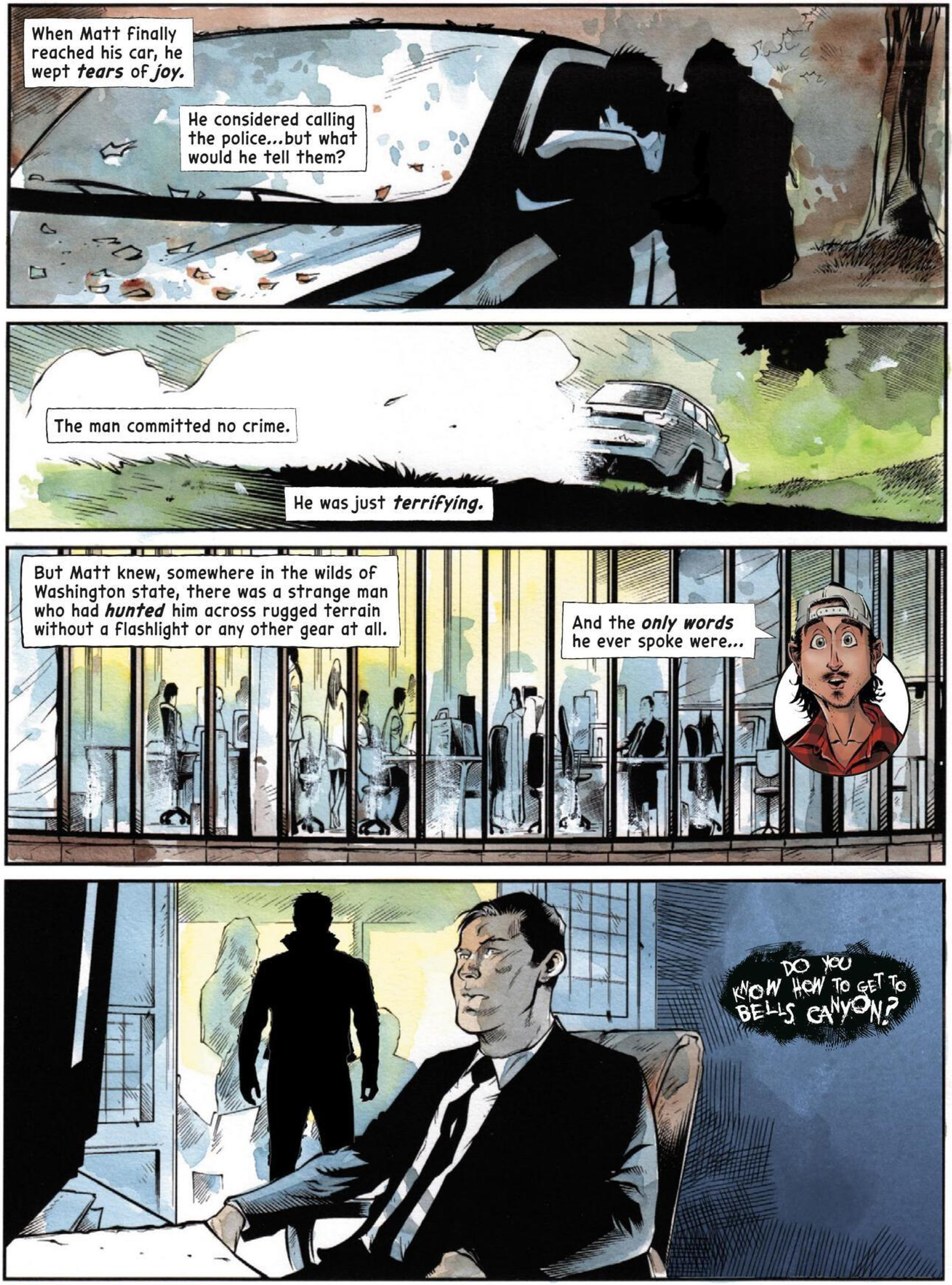

The next morning, Matt packed up his campsite.
He began practically *running* in the direction of his car.
All day he looks back, expecting to see the man who has *stalked* him across miles and days.
He can't shake the feeling that he's being stalked still.
Watched.
By sundown, he's *physically* and *mentally* exhausted.
He has *no choice* but to sleep.


Sleep.
In the middle of the night, Matt wakes up.
Footsteps pace outside his tent.
He clutches his knife and waits.
The footsteps circle his campsite.
Over and *over.*
For hours...
and hours...
...and *hours.*

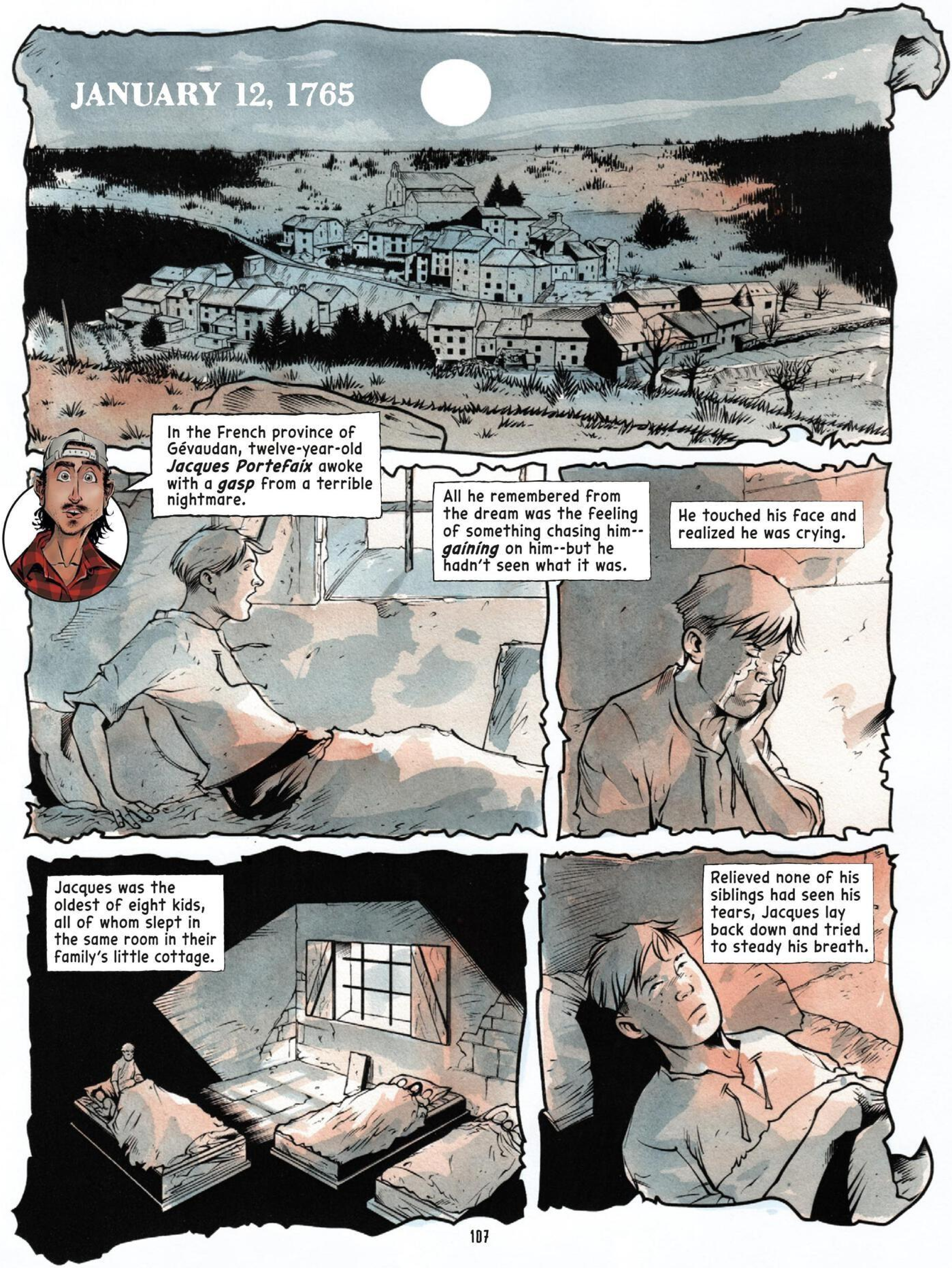

The next morning, Matt *runs.*
He knows he isn't alone.
It doesn't matter how *far* he goes.
It doesn't matter how *fast.*
Somewhere out there in the forest...
...the man is *lurking.*

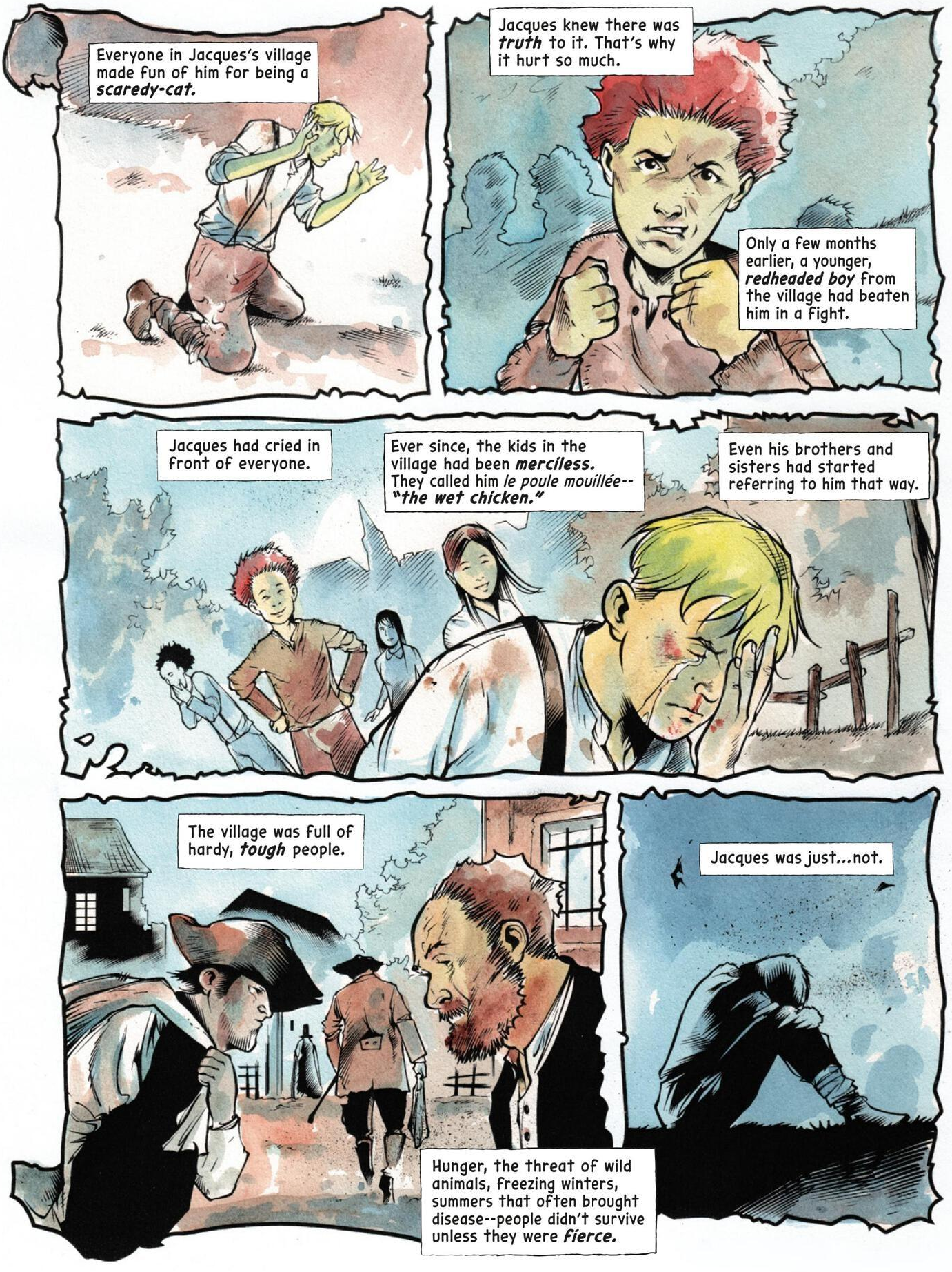

Darkness fell, but Matt was still too far from his car.
He was forced to set up his tent one last night.
He waits for any sign of his *tormentor.* A footfall. A whispered breath...
...But the man doesn't arrive.
Matt tells himself it's over.
Maybe the man has finally left him alone.
He closes his eyes to sleep.
Finally sleep.
DO YOU KNOW HOW TO GET TO BELLS CANYON?

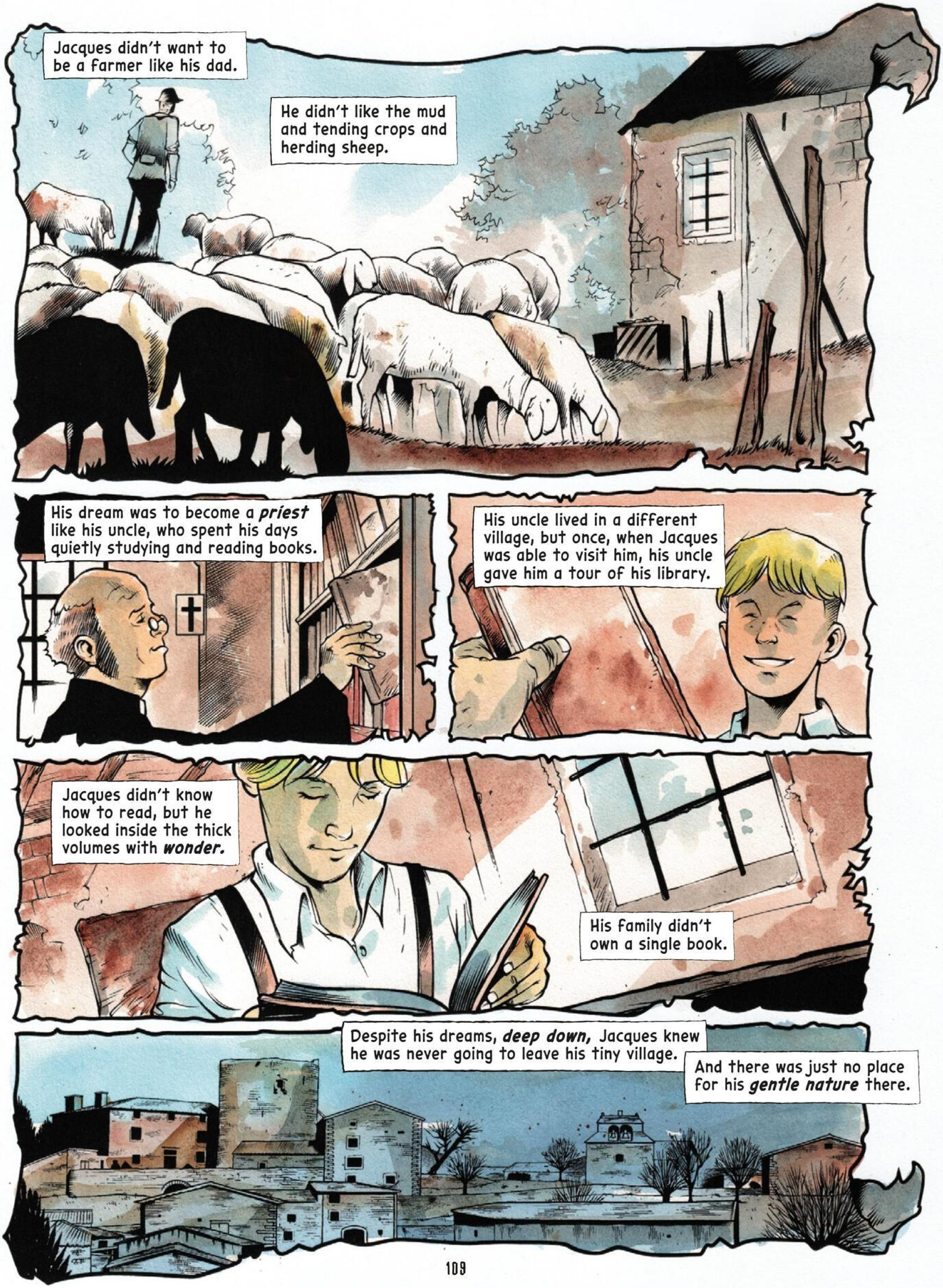

He's *back.*
Crisscrossing the campsite.
Grunting.
Moaning.
An *animal.*
Over and over and *over* again.
All through the night.
At dawn, Matt hears him *scamper* back into the woods.

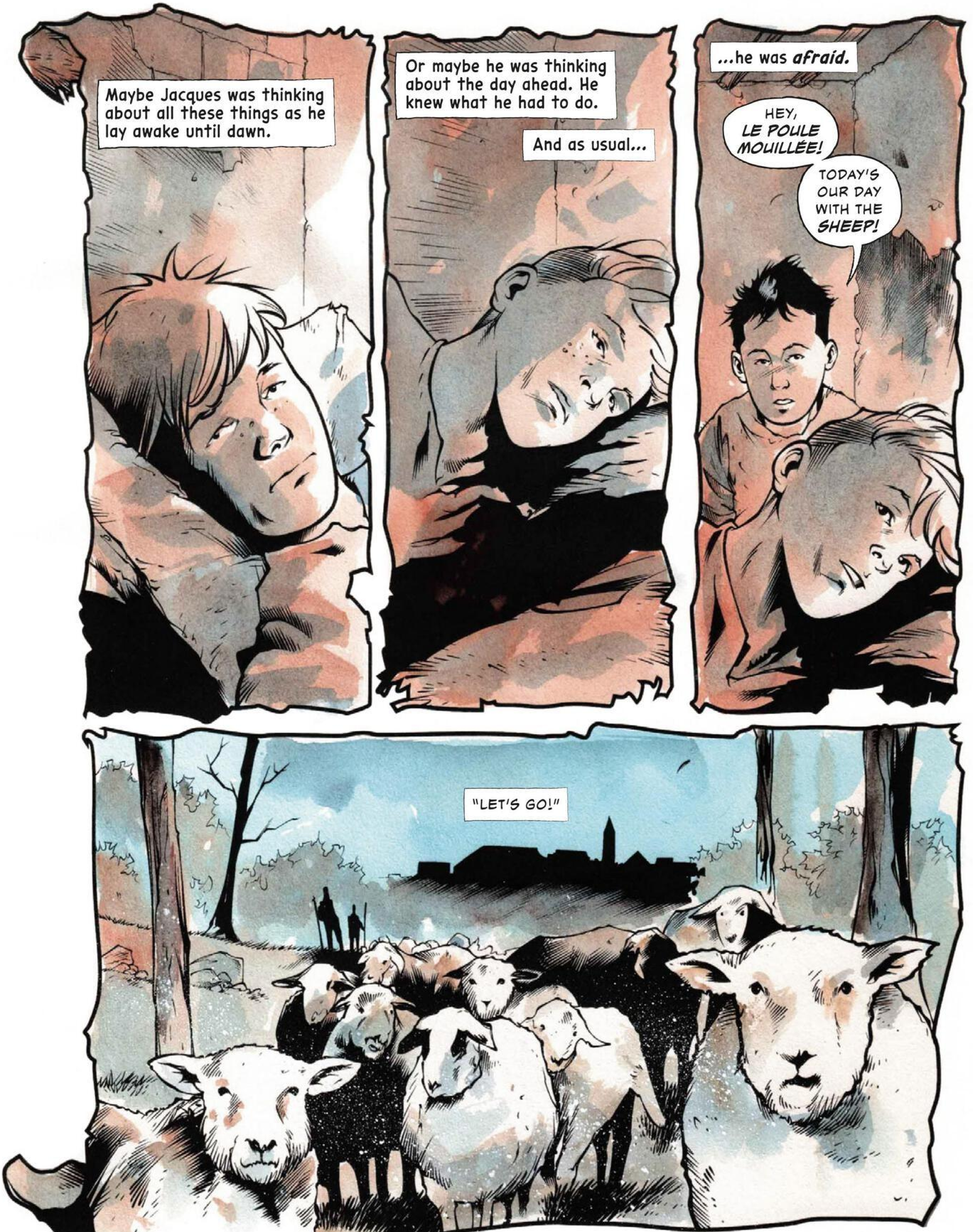

When Matt finally reached his car, he wept *tears* of *joy.*
He considered calling the police...but what would he tell them?
The man committed no crime.
He was just *terrifying.*
But Matt knew, somewhere in the wilds of Washington state, there was a strange man who had *hunted* him across rugged terrain without a flashlight or any other gear at all.
And the *only words* he ever spoke were...
DO YOU KNOW HOW TO GET TO BELLS CANYON?

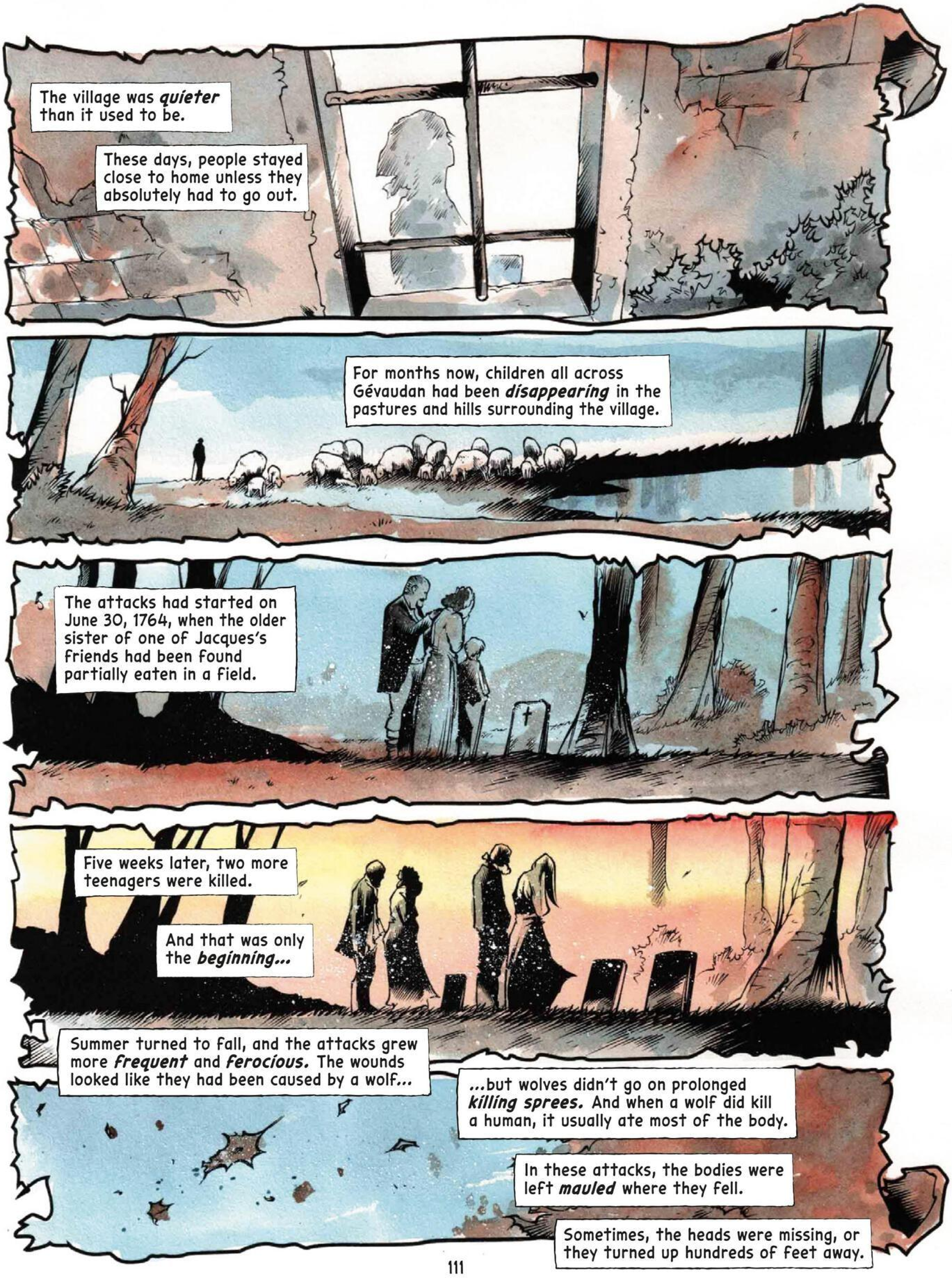
THE BEAST OF GÉVAUDAN

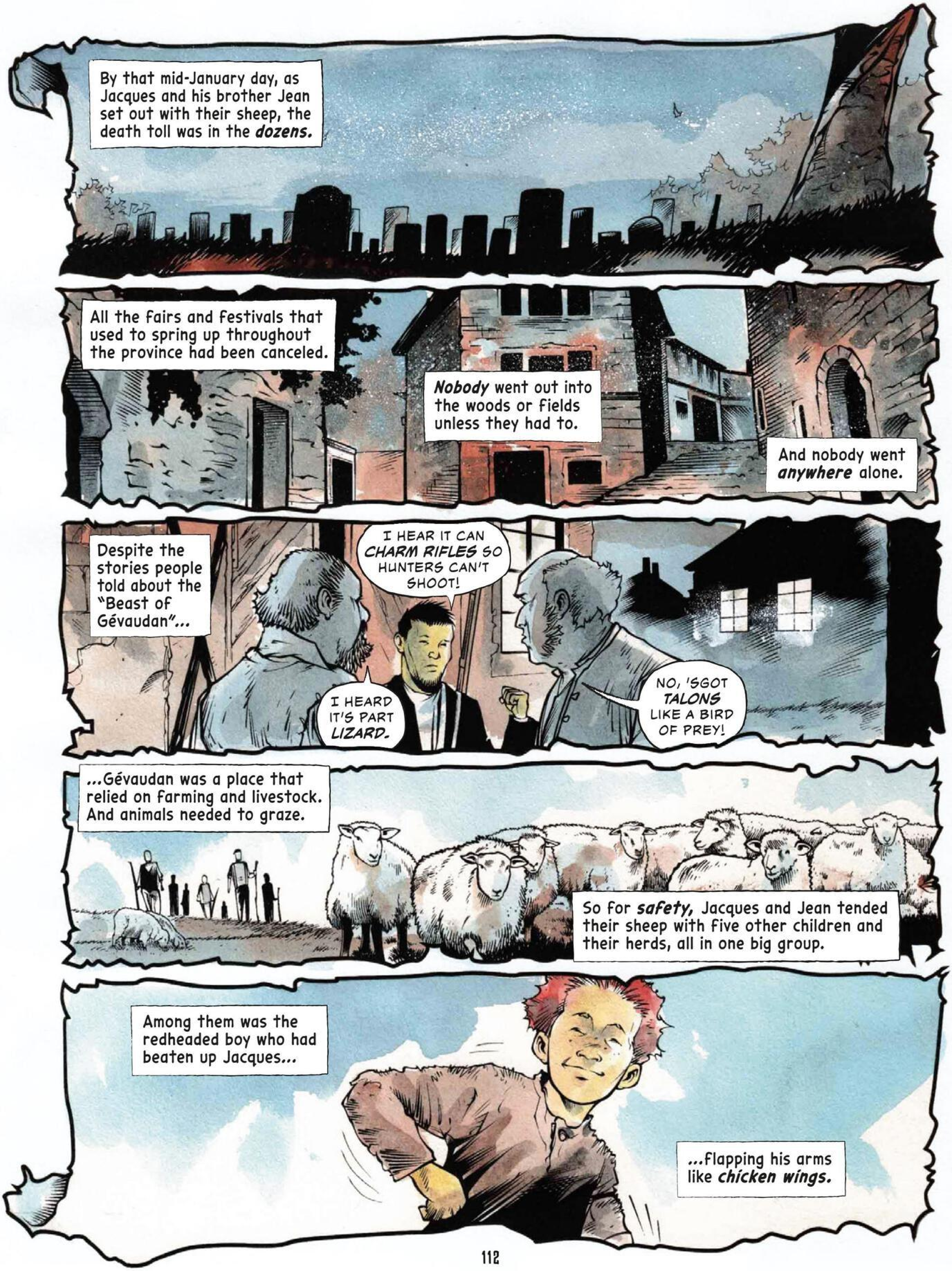

JANUARY 12, 1765
In the French province of Gévaudan, twelve-year-old ***Jacques Portefaix*** awoke with a ***gasp*** from a terrible nightmare.
All he remembered from the dream was the feeling of something chasing him--***gaining*** on him--but he hadn't seen what it was.
He touched his face and realized he was crying.
Jacques was the oldest of eight kids, all of whom slept in the same room in their family's little cottage.
Relieved none of his siblings had seen his tears, Jacques lay back down and tried to steady his breath.


Everyone in Jacques's village made fun of him for being a ***scaredy-cat.***
Jacques knew there was ***truth*** to it. That's why it hurt so much.
Only a few months earlier, a younger, ***redheaded boy*** from the village had beaten him in a fight.
Jacques had cried in front of everyone.
Ever since, the kids in the village had been ***merciless.*** They called him *le poule mouillée*--***"the wet chicken."***
Even his brothers and sisters had started referring to him that way.
The village was full of hardy, ***tough*** people.
Hunger, the threat of wild animals, freezing winters, summers that often brought disease--people didn't survive unless they were ***fierce.***
Jacques was just...not.

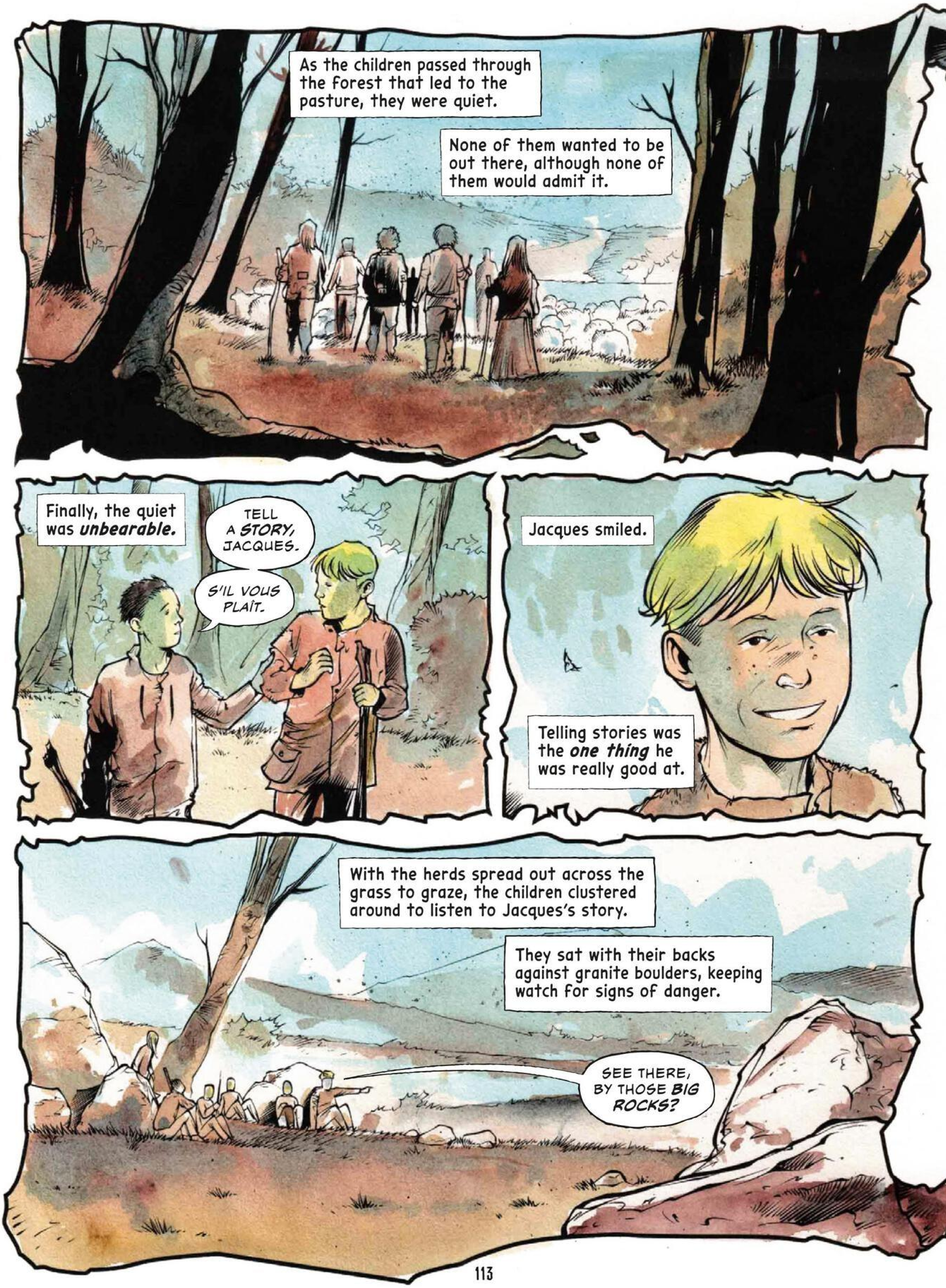

Jacques didn't want to be a farmer like his dad.
He didn't like the mud and tending crops and herding sheep.
His dream was to become a ***priest*** like his uncle, who spent his days quietly studying and reading books.
His uncle lived in a different village, but once, when Jacques was able to visit him, his uncle gave him a tour of his library.
Jacques didn't know how to read, but he looked inside the thick volumes with ***wonder.***
His family didn't own a single book.
Despite his dreams, ***deep down,*** Jacques knew he was never going to leave his tiny village.
And there was just no place for his ***gentle nature*** there.

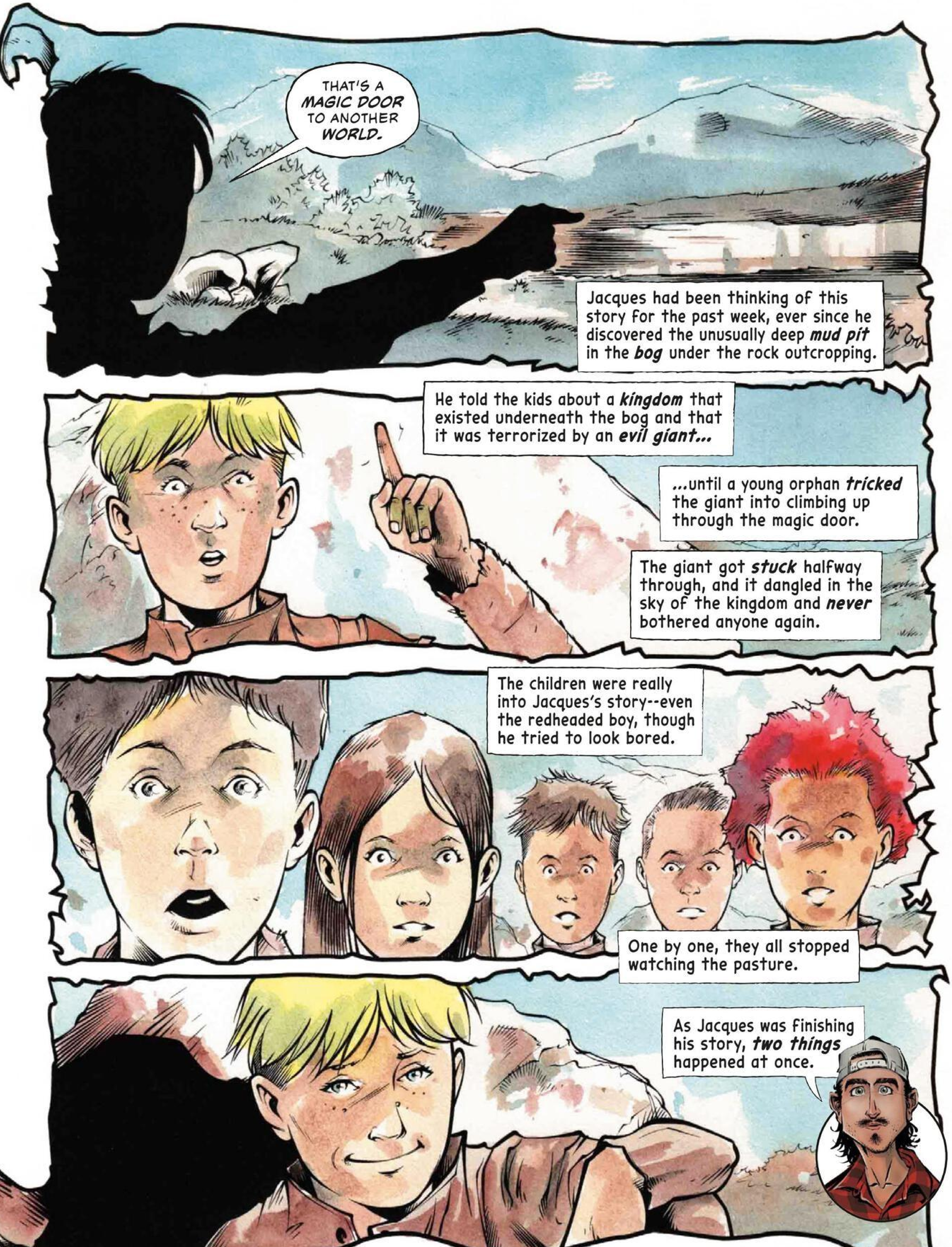

Maybe Jacques was thinking about all these things as he lay awake until dawn.
Or maybe he was thinking about the day ahead. He knew what he had to do.
And as usual...
...he was *afraid.*
HEY, **LE POULE MOUILLÉE!**
TODAY'S OUR DAY WITH THE **SHEEP!**
"LET'S GO!"

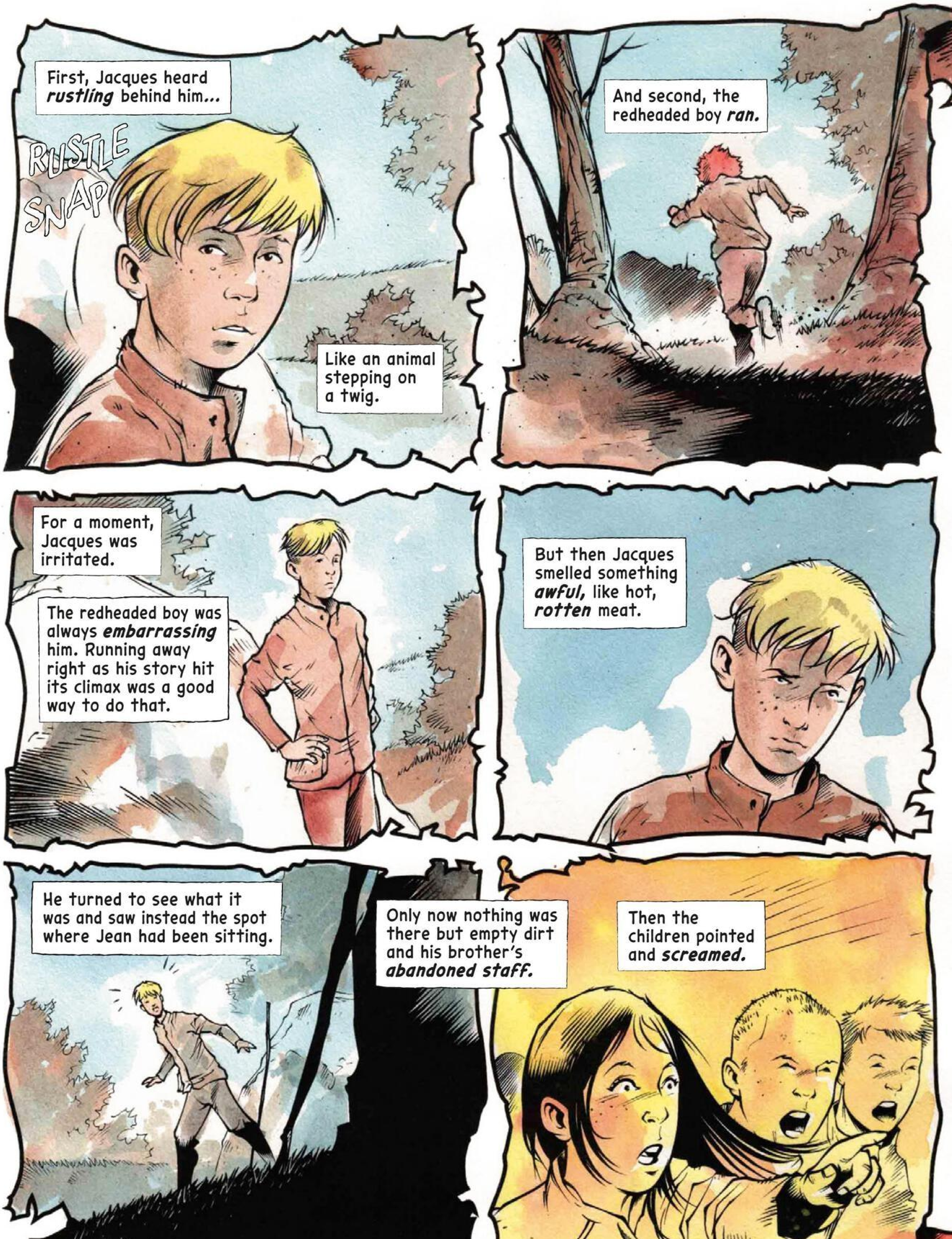

The village was *quieter* than it used to be.
These days, people stayed close to home unless they absolutely had to go out.
For months now, children all across Gévaudan had been *disappearing* in the pastures and hills surrounding the village.
The attacks had started on June 30, 1764, when the older sister of one of Jacques's friends had been found partially eaten in a field.
Five weeks later, two more teenagers were killed.
And that was only the *beginning...*
Summer turned to fall, and the attacks grew more *frequent* and *ferocious.* The wounds looked like they had been caused by a wolf...
...but wolves didn't go on prolonged *killing sprees.* And when a wolf did kill a human, it usually ate most of the body.
In these attacks, the bodies were left *mauled* where they fell.
Sometimes, the heads were missing, or they turned up hundreds of feet away.

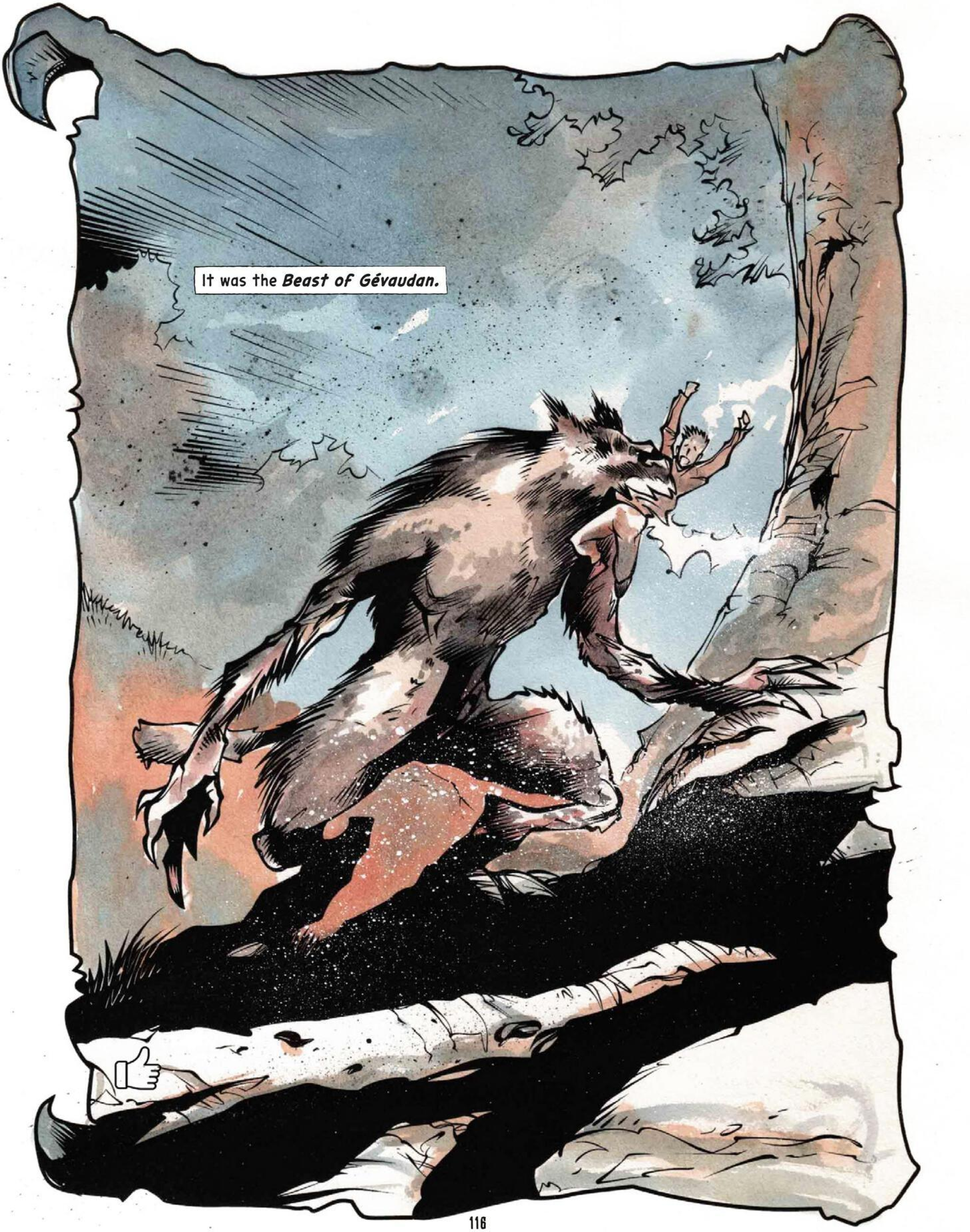

By that mid-January day, as Jacques and his brother Jean set out with their sheep, the death toll was in the *dozens.*
All the fairs and festivals that used to spring up throughout the province had been canceled.
Nobody went out into the woods or fields unless they had to.
And nobody went *anywhere* alone.
Despite the stories people told about the "Beast of Gévaudan"...
I HEAR IT CAN *CHARM RIFLES* SO HUNTERS CAN'T SHOOT!
I HEARD IT'S PART *LIZARD.*
NO, 'SGOT *TALONS* LIKE A BIRD OF PREY!
...Gévaudan was a place that relied on farming and livestock. And animals needed to graze.
So for *safety,* Jacques and Jean tended their sheep with five other children and their herds, all in one big group.
Among them was the redheaded boy who had beaten up Jacques...
...Flapping his arms like *chicken wings.*

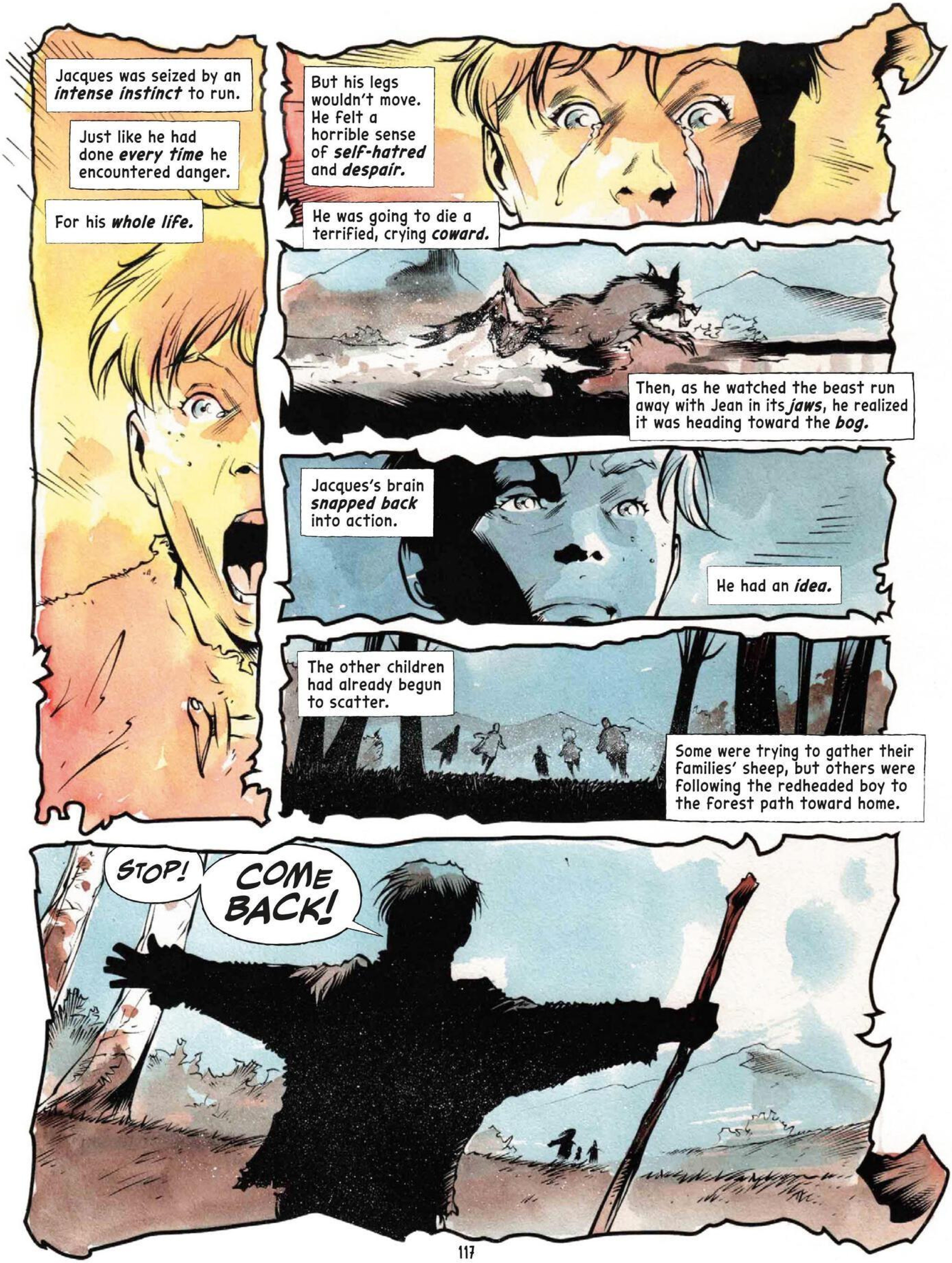
]

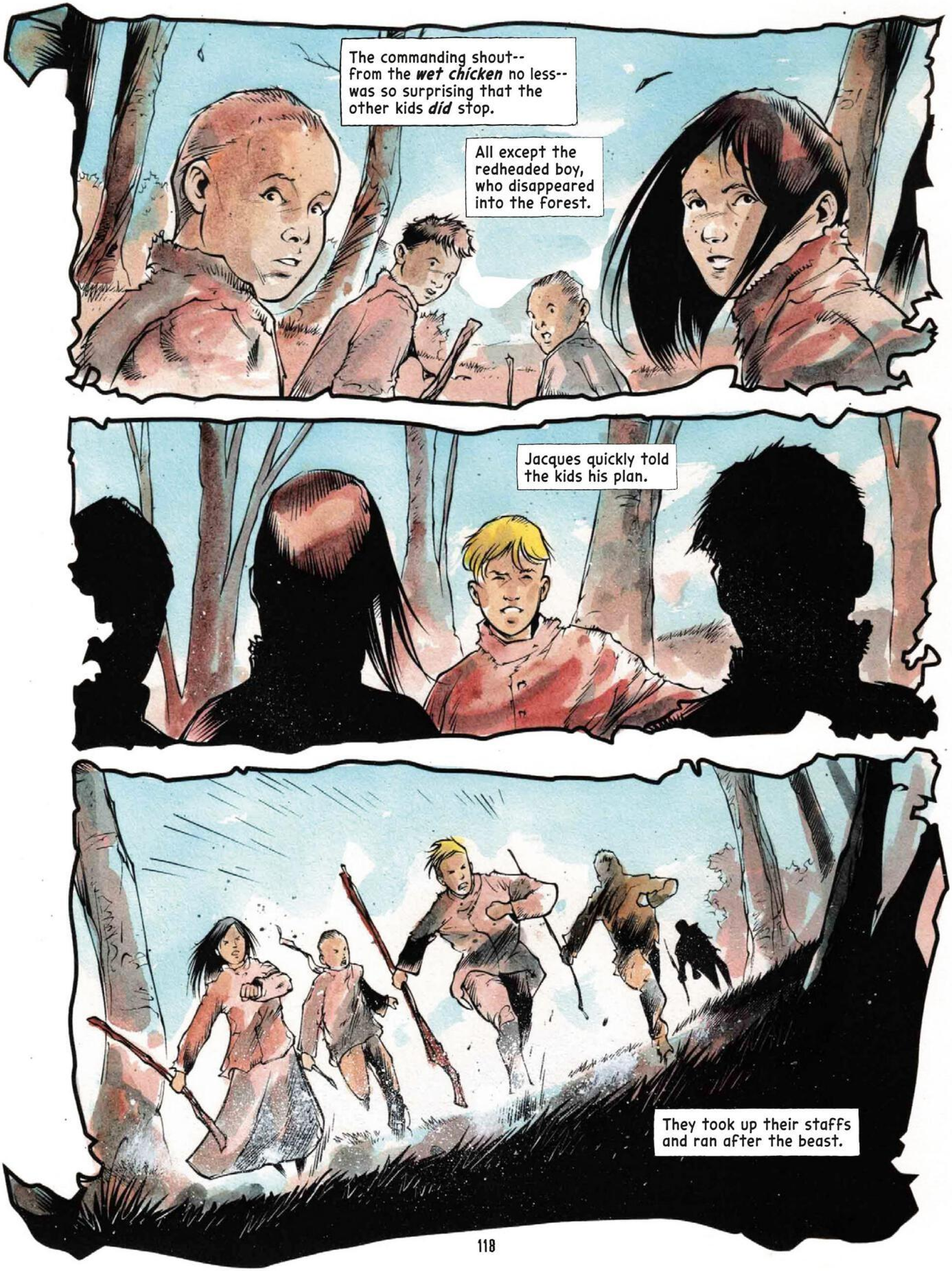

As the children passed through the forest that led to the pasture, they were quiet.
None of them wanted to be out there, although none of them would admit it.
Finally, the quiet was ***unbearable.***
TELL A ***STORY,*** JACQUES.
S'IL VOUS PLAÎT.
Jacques smiled.
Telling stories was the ***one thing*** he was really good at.
With the herds spread out across the grass to graze, the children clustered around to listen to Jacques's story.
They sat with their backs against granite boulders, keeping watch for signs of danger.
SEE THERE, BY THOSE ***BIG ROCKS?***

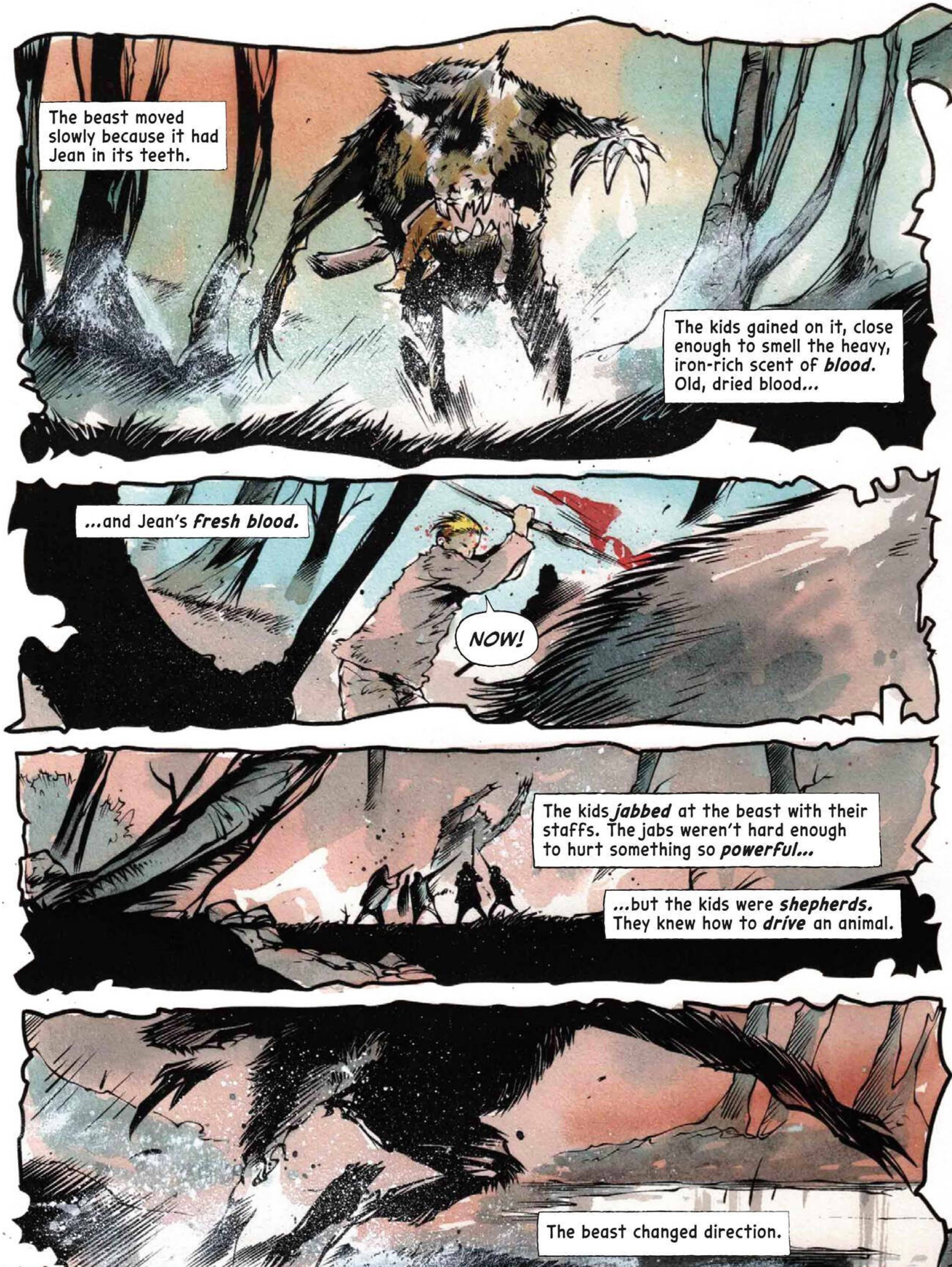

THAT'S A *MAGIC DOOR* TO ANOTHER *WORLD.*
Jacques had been thinking of this story for the past week, ever since he discovered the unusually deep *mud pit* in the *bog* under the rock outcropping.
He told the kids about a *kingdom* that existed underneath the bog and that it was terrorized by an *evil giant...*
...until a young orphan *tricked* the giant into climbing up through the magic door.
The giant got *stuck* halfway through, and it dangled in the sky of the kingdom and *never* bothered anyone again.
The children were really into Jacques's story--even the redheaded boy, though he tried to look bored.
One by one, they all stopped watching the pasture.
As Jacques was finishing his story, *two things* happened at once.

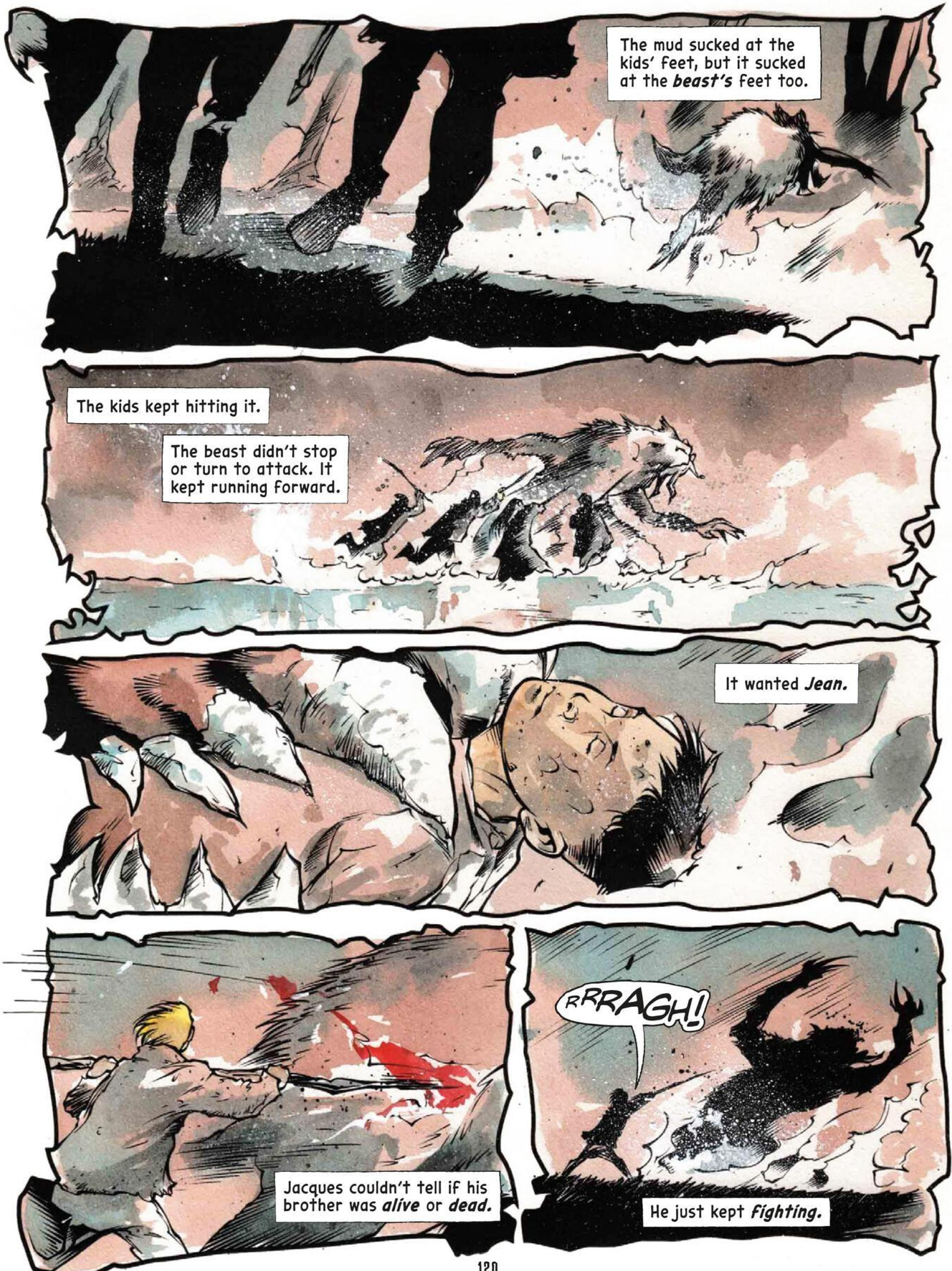

First, Jacques heard *rustling* behind him...
RUSTLE
SNAP
Like an animal stepping on a twig.
And second, the redheaded boy *ran.*
For a moment, Jacques was irritated.
The redheaded boy was always *embarrassing* him. Running away right as his story hit its climax was a good way to do that.
But then Jacques smelled something *awful,* like hot, *rotten* meat.
He turned to see what it was and saw instead the spot where Jean had been sitting.
Only now nothing was there but empty dirt and his brother's *abandoned staff.*
Then the children pointed and *screamed.*

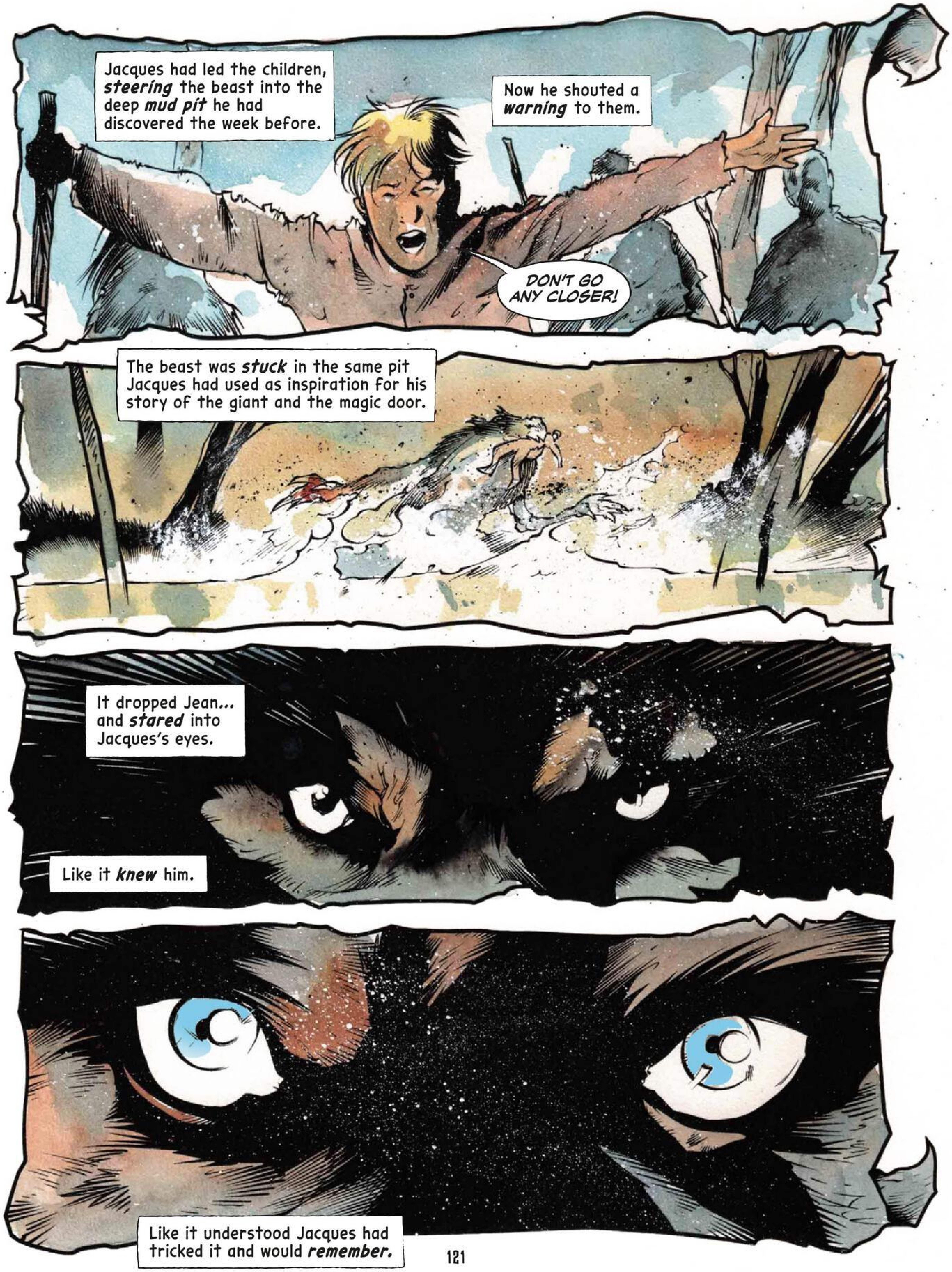

It was the ***Beast of Gévaudan.***

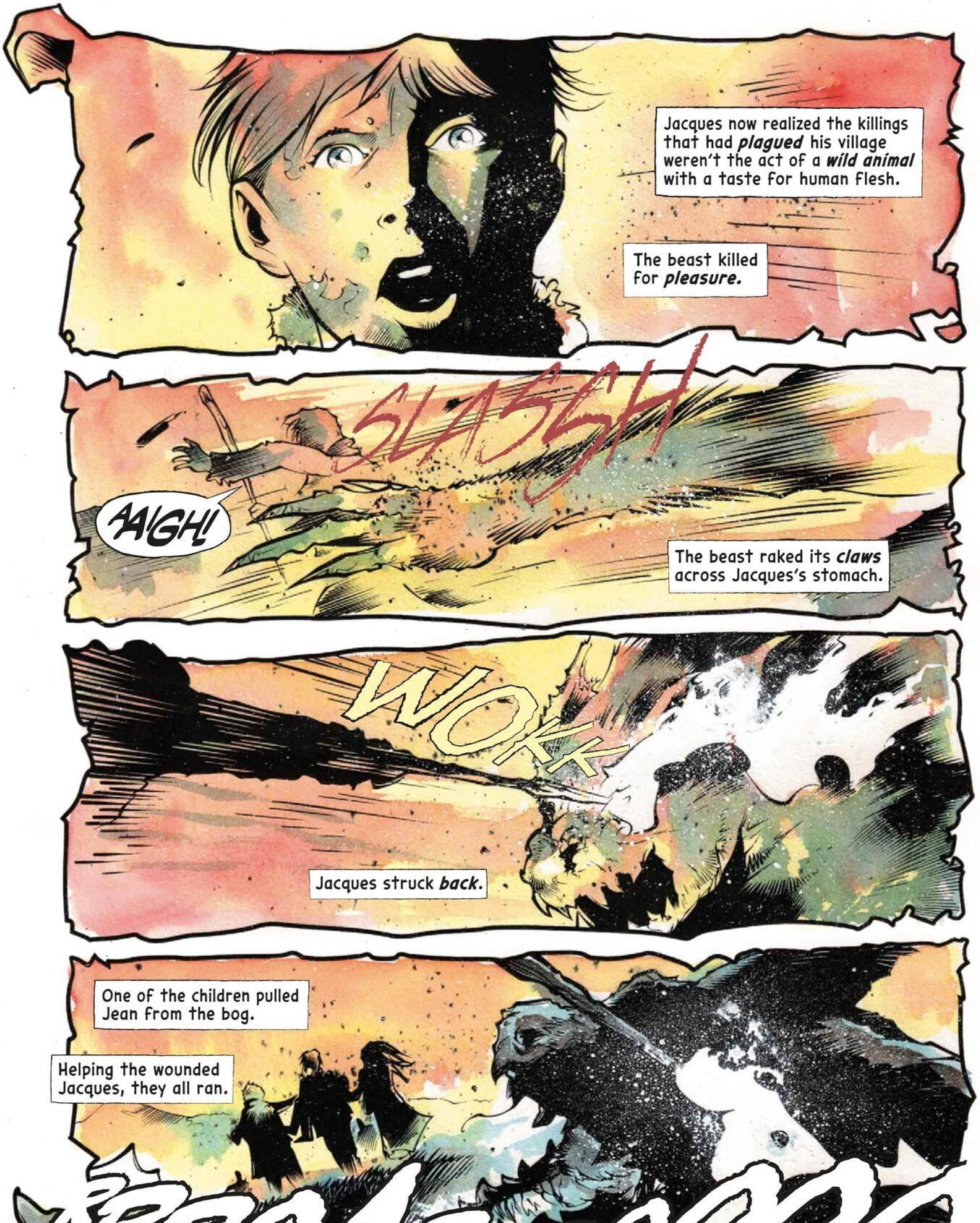

Jacques was seized by an *intense instinct* to run.
Just like he had done *every time* he encountered danger.
For his *whole life.*
But his legs wouldn't move. He felt a horrible sense of *self-hatred* and *despair.*
He was going to die a terrified, crying *coward.*
Then, as he watched the beast run away with Jean in its *jaws*, he realized it was heading toward the *bog.*
Jacques's brain *snapped back* into action.
He had an *idea.*
The other children had already begun to scatter.
Some were trying to gather their families' sheep, but others were following the redheaded boy to the forest path toward home.
STOP!
COME BACK!

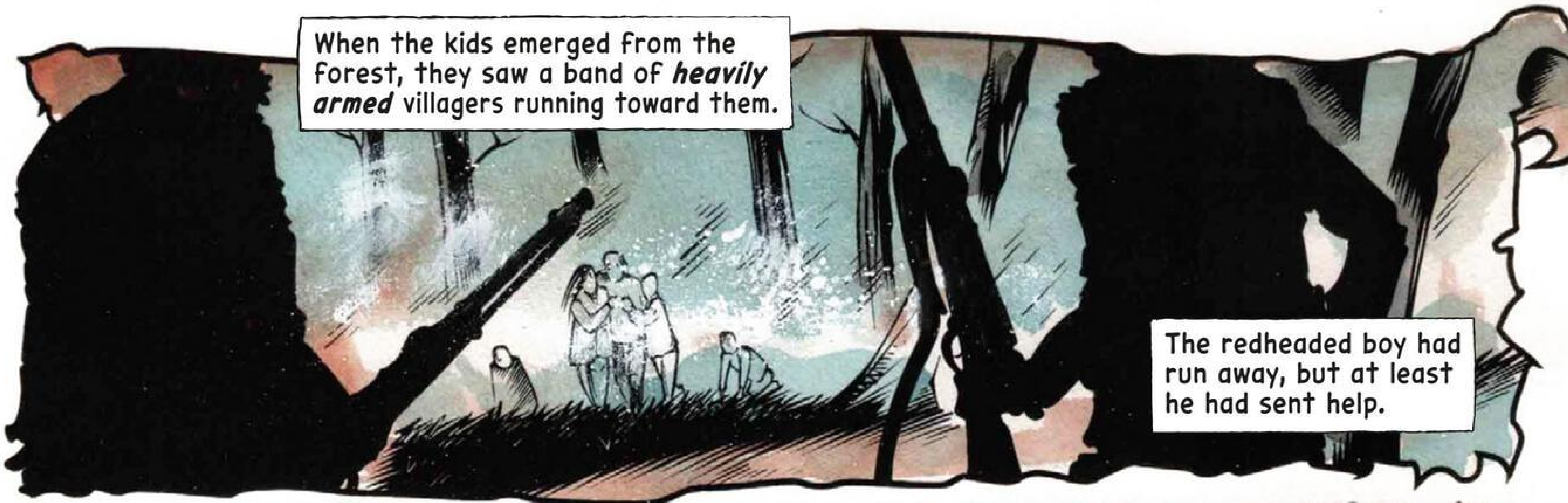

The commanding shout--
from the *wet chicken* no less--
was so surprising that the
other kids *did* stop.
All except the
redheaded boy,
who disappeared
into the forest.
Jacques quickly told
the kids his plan.
They took up their staffs
and ran after the beast.

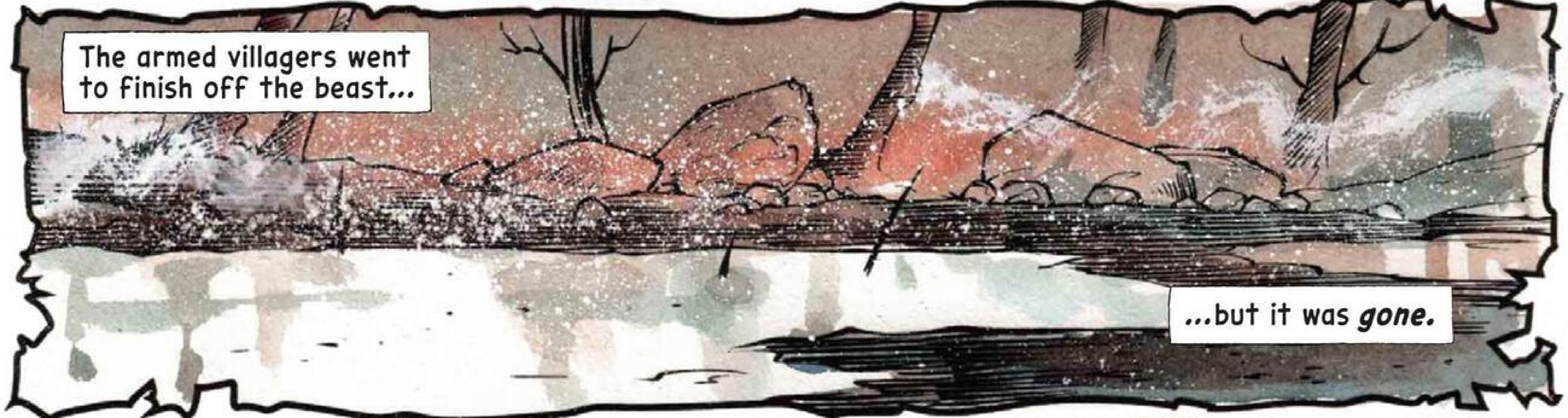

The beast moved slowly because it had Jean in its teeth.
The kids gained on it, close enough to smell the heavy, iron-rich scent of ***blood.*** Old, dried blood...
...and Jean's ***fresh blood.***
NOW!
The kids ***jabbed*** at the beast with their staffs. The jabs weren't hard enough to hurt something so ***powerful...***
...but the kids were ***shepherds.*** They knew how to ***drive*** an animal.
The beast changed direction.
It was now aimed at the ***bog.***

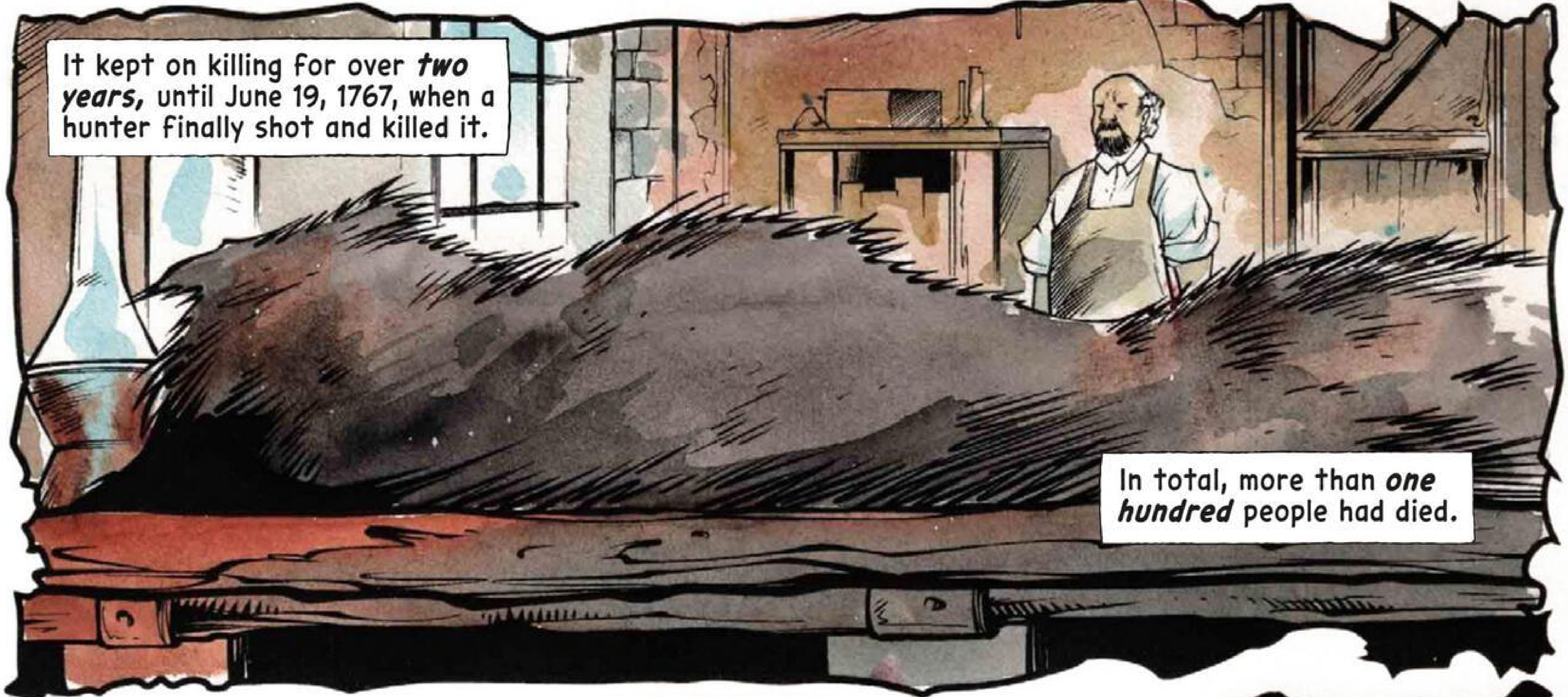

The mud sucked at the kids' feet, but it sucked at the *beast's* feet too.
The kids kept hitting it.
The beast didn't stop or turn to attack. It kept running forward.
It wanted *Jean.*
Jacques couldn't tell if his brother was *alive* or *dead.*
RRRAGH!
He just kept *fighting.*

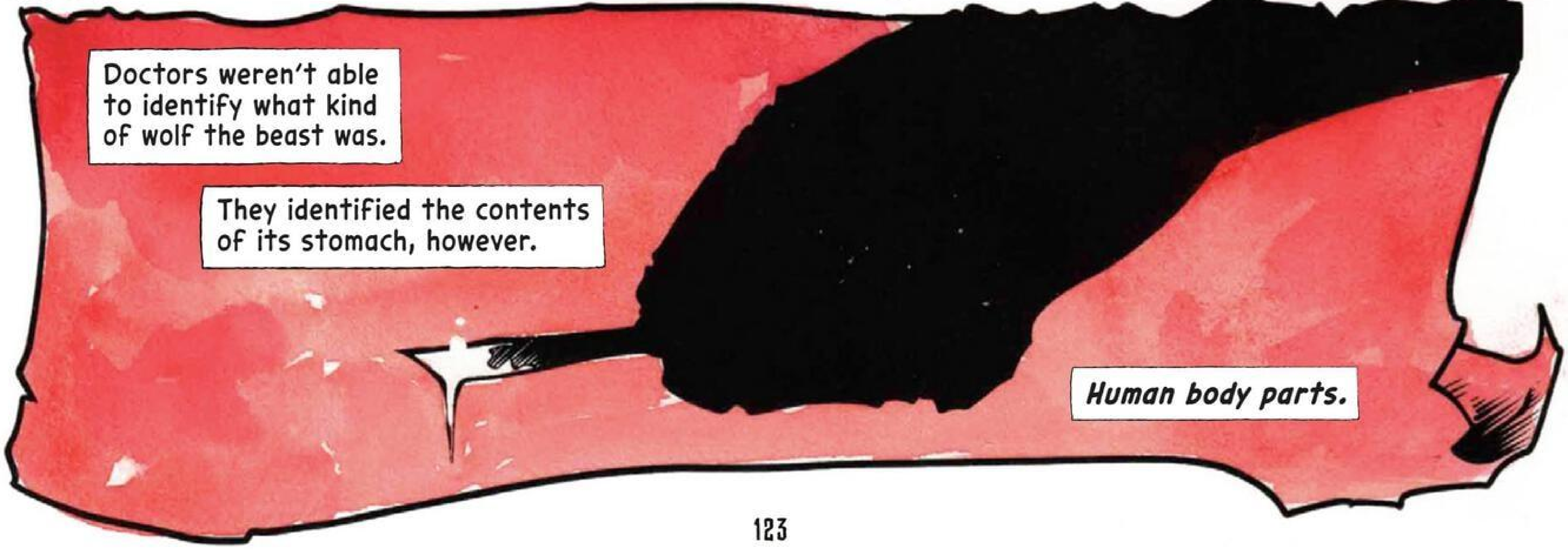

Jacques had led the children, *steering* the beast into the deep *mud pit* he had discovered the week before.
Now he shouted a *warning* to them.
DON'T GO ANY CLOSER!
The beast was *stuck* in the same pit Jacques had used as inspiration for his story of the giant and the magic door.
It dropped Jean... and *stared* into Jacques's eyes.
Like it *knew* him.
Like it understood Jacques had tricked it and would *remember.*

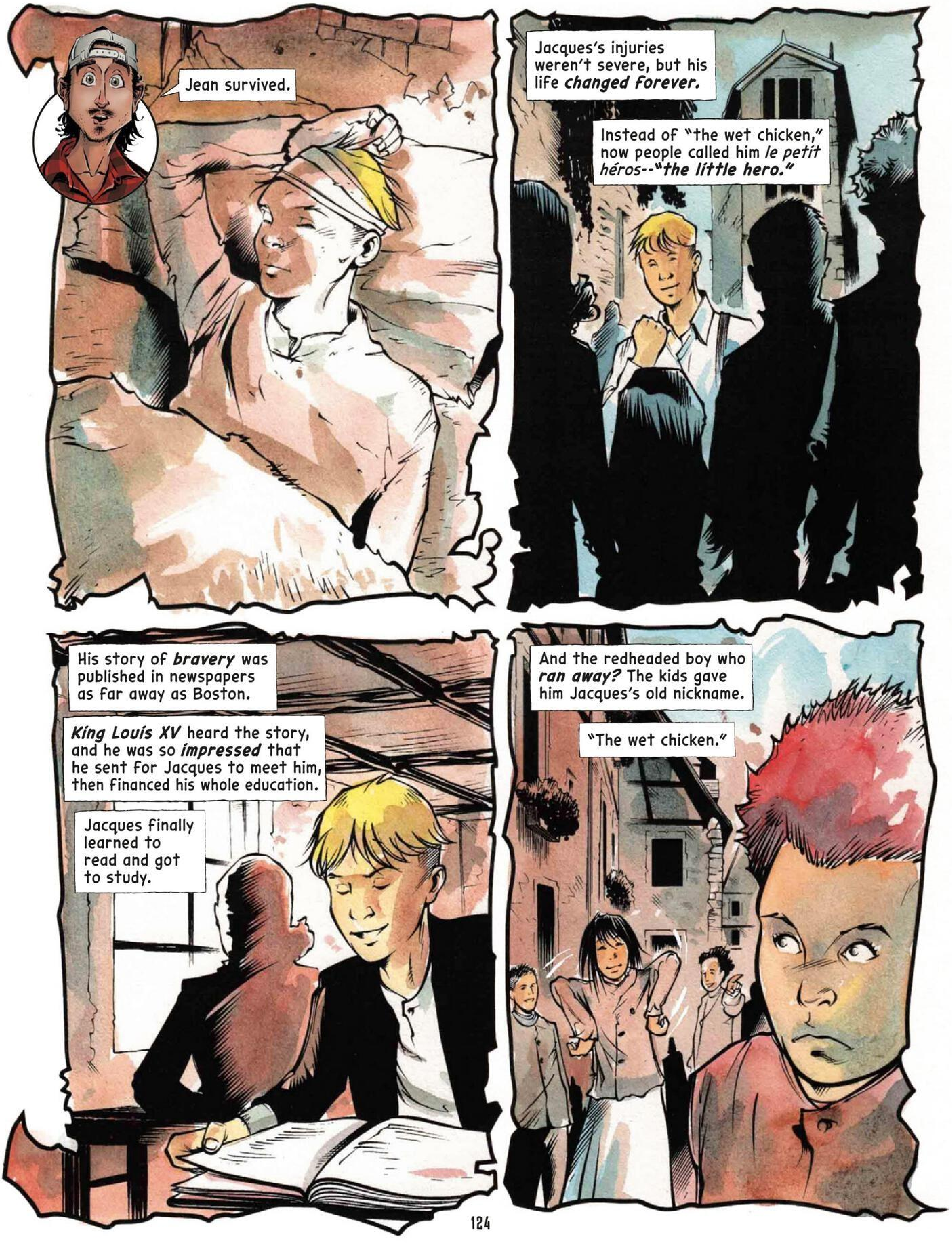

Jacques now realized the killings that had *plagued* his village weren't the act of a *wild animal* with a taste for human flesh.
The beast killed for *pleasure.*
SLASSH
AAIGH!
The beast raked its *claws* across Jacques's stomach.
WOKK
Jacques struck *back*.
One of the children pulled Jean from the bog.
Helping the wounded Jacques, they all ran.
RRROAReeeOOOO


When the kids emerged from the forest, they saw a band of *heavily armed* villagers running toward them.
The redheaded boy had run away, but at least he had sent help.

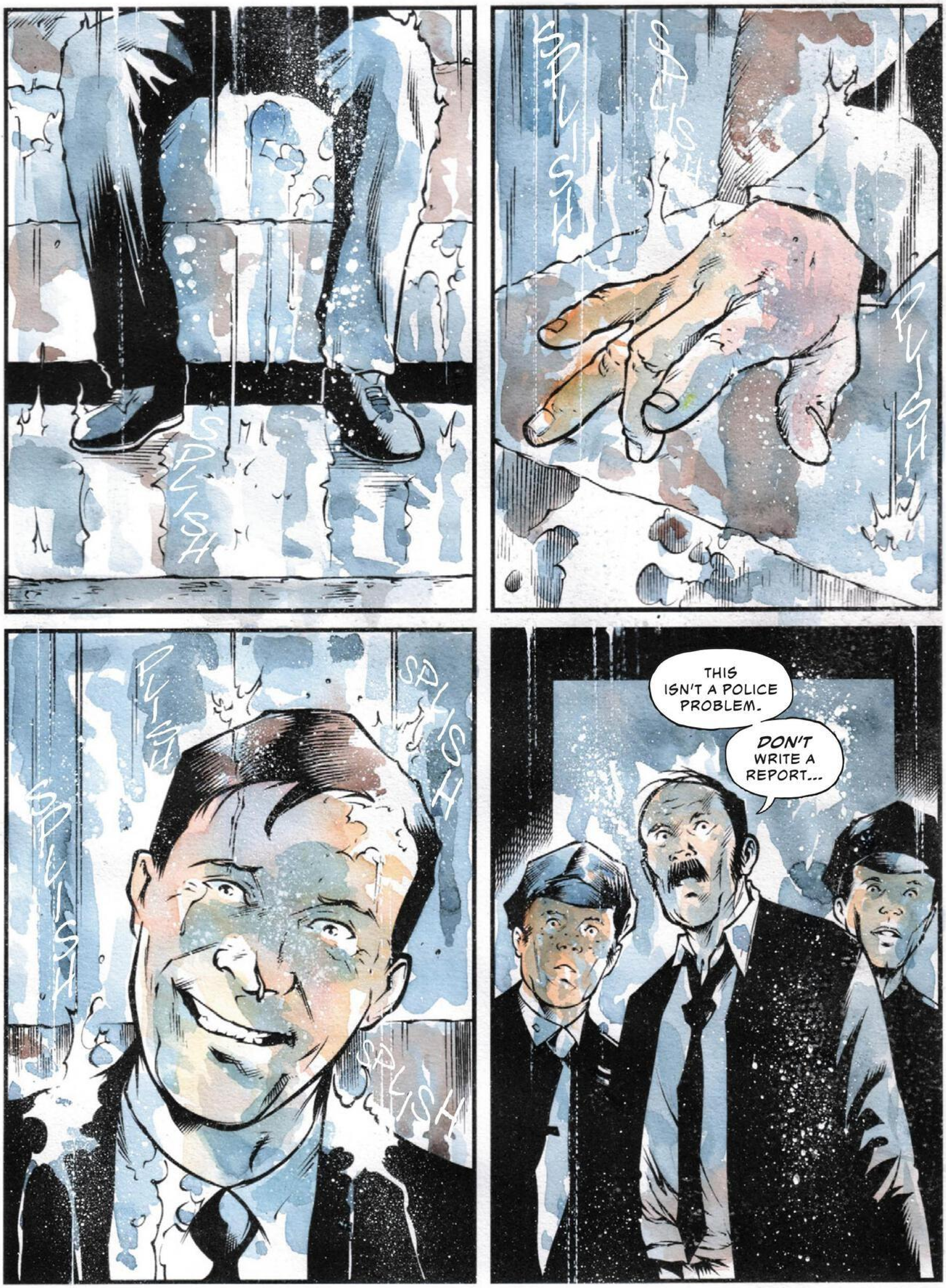

The armed villagers went to finish off the beast...
...but it was *gone.*


It kept on killing for over *two years,* until June 19, 1767, when a hunter finally shot and killed it.
In total, more than *one hundred* people had died.


Doctors weren't able to identify what kind of wolf the beast was.
They identified the contents of its stomach, however.
Human body parts.


Jean survived.
Jacques's injuries weren't severe, but his life *changed forever.*
Instead of "the wet chicken," now people called him *le petit héros*--**"the little hero."**
His story of ***bravery*** was published in newspapers as far away as Boston.
King Louis XV heard the story, and he was so ***impressed*** that he sent for Jacques to meet him, then financed his whole education.
Jacques finally learned to read and got to study.
And the redheaded boy who ***ran away?*** The kids gave him Jacques's old nickname.
"The wet chicken."

MAKE IT RAIN


SPLISH
SPLISH
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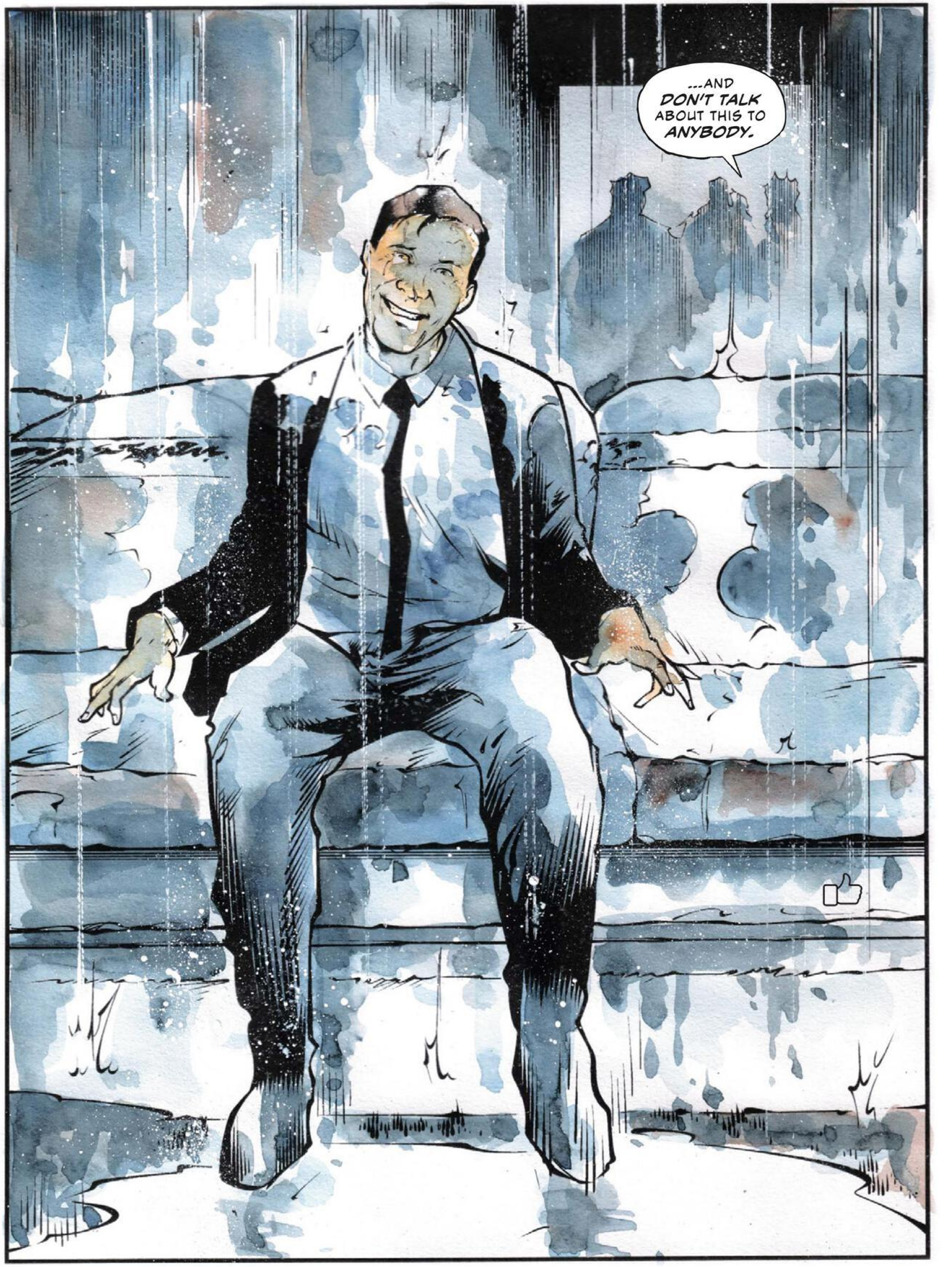
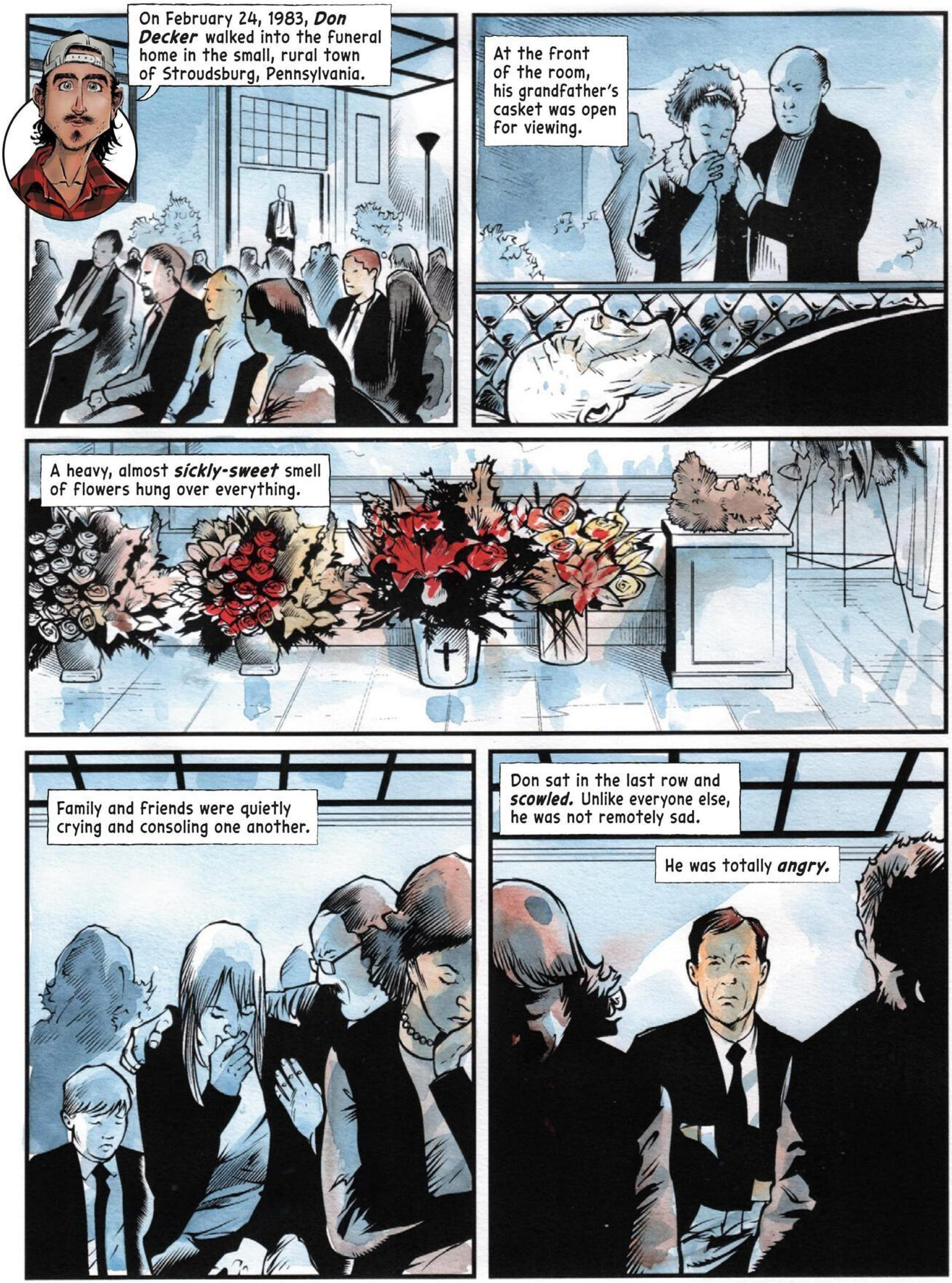
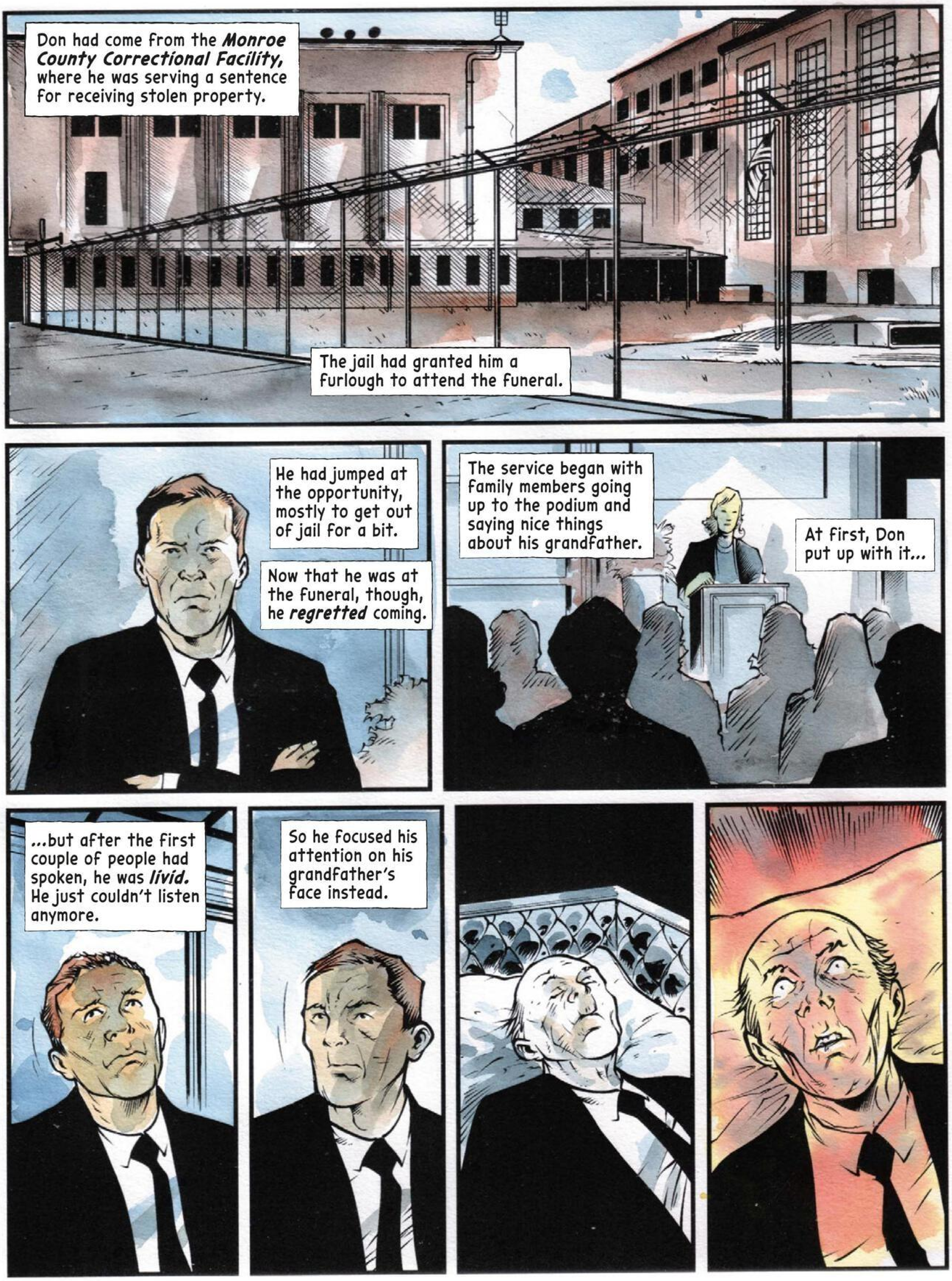
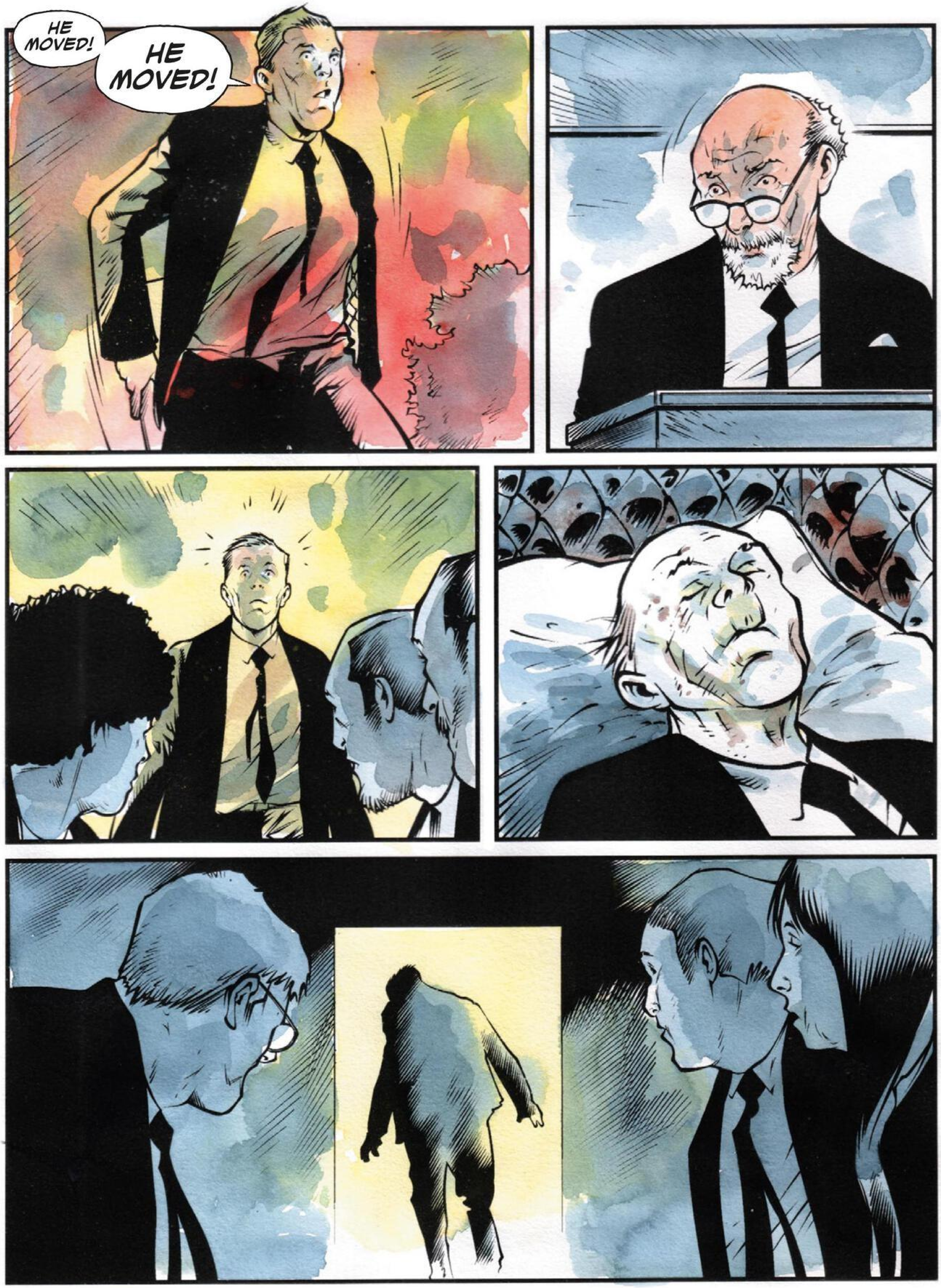
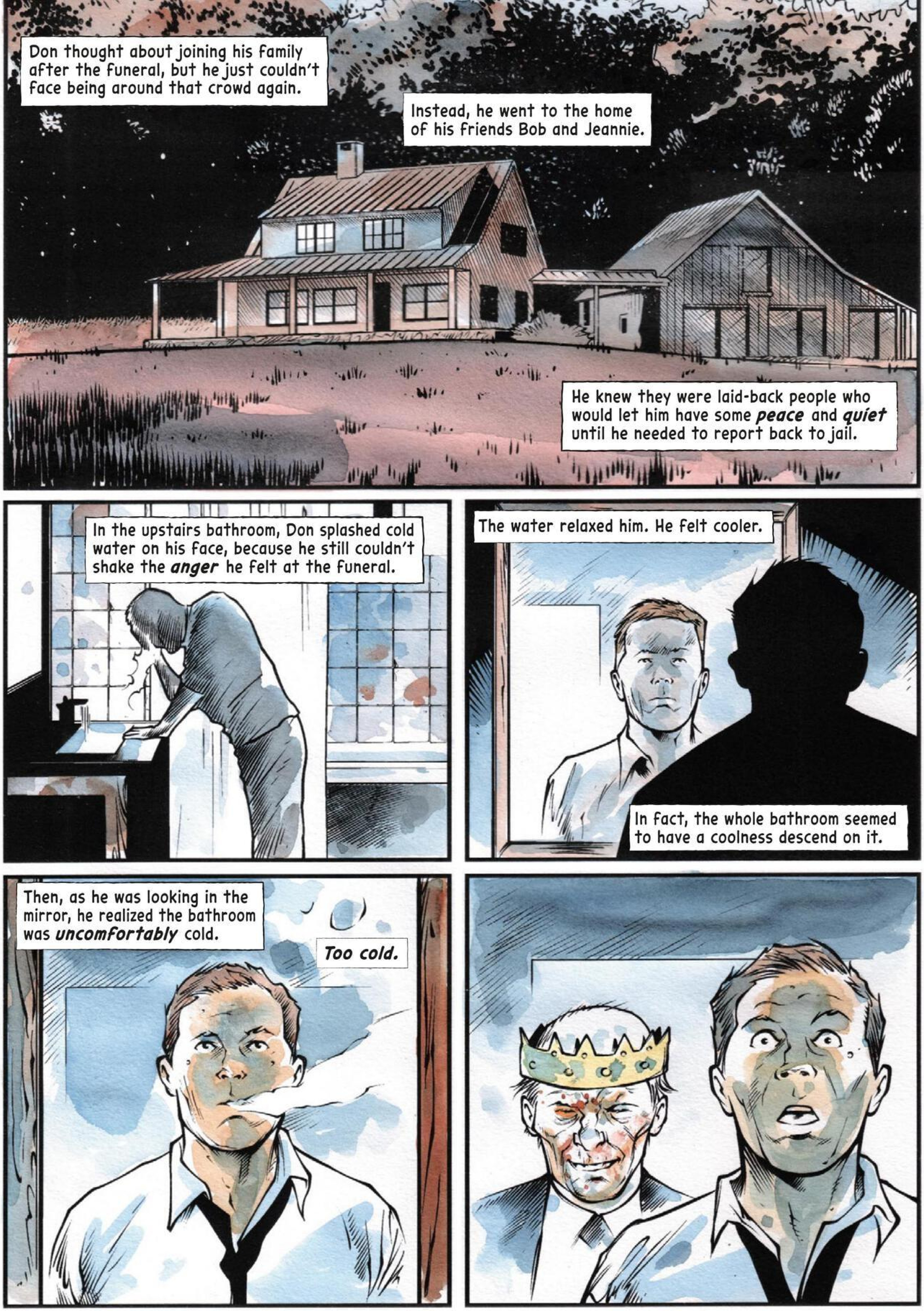
PLISH
PLISH
SPLISH
SPLISH
SPLISH
THIS ISN'T A POLICE PROBLEM.
DON'T WRITE A REPORT...

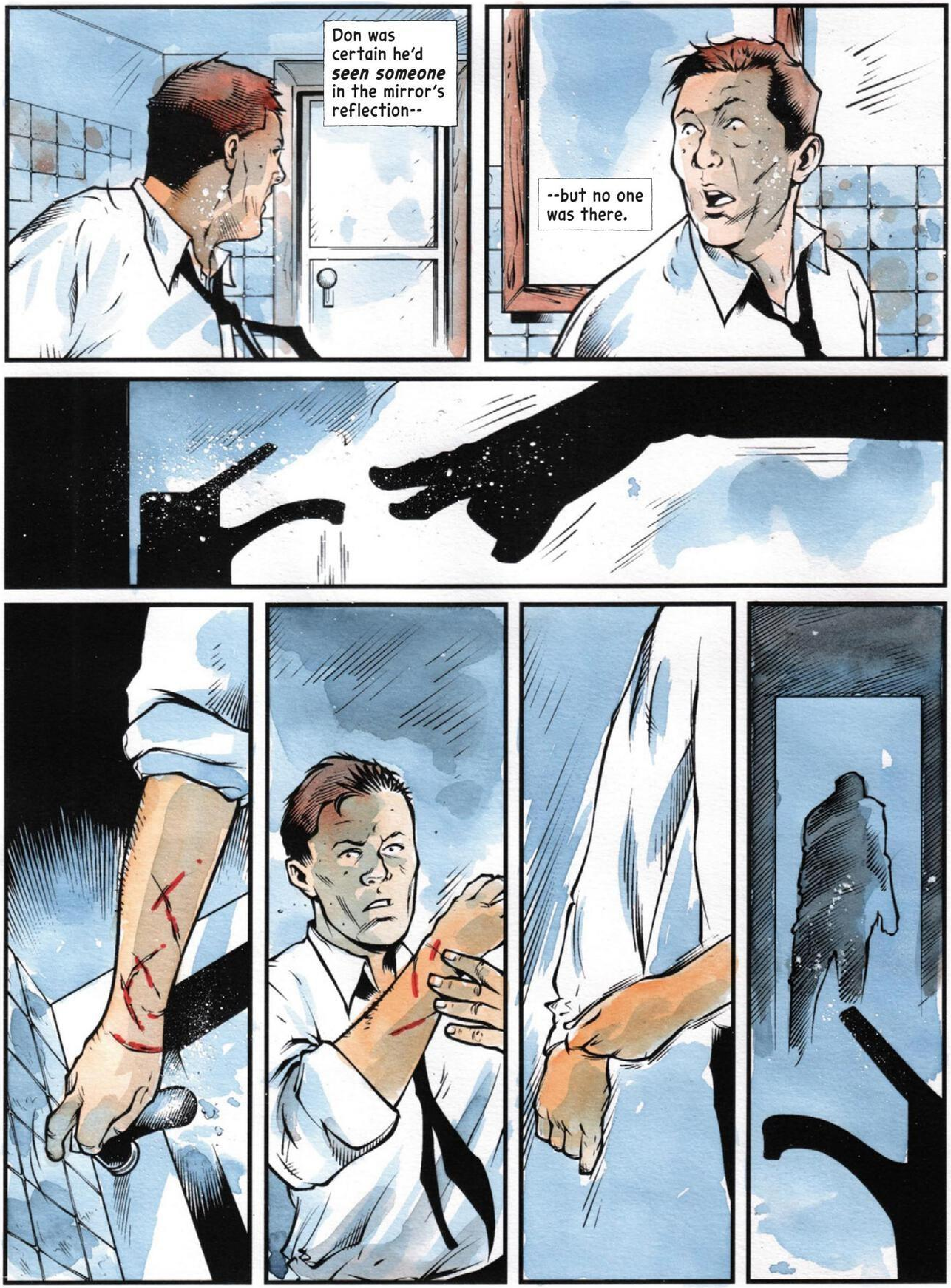

...AND *DON'T TALK* ABOUT THIS TO *ANYBODY*.

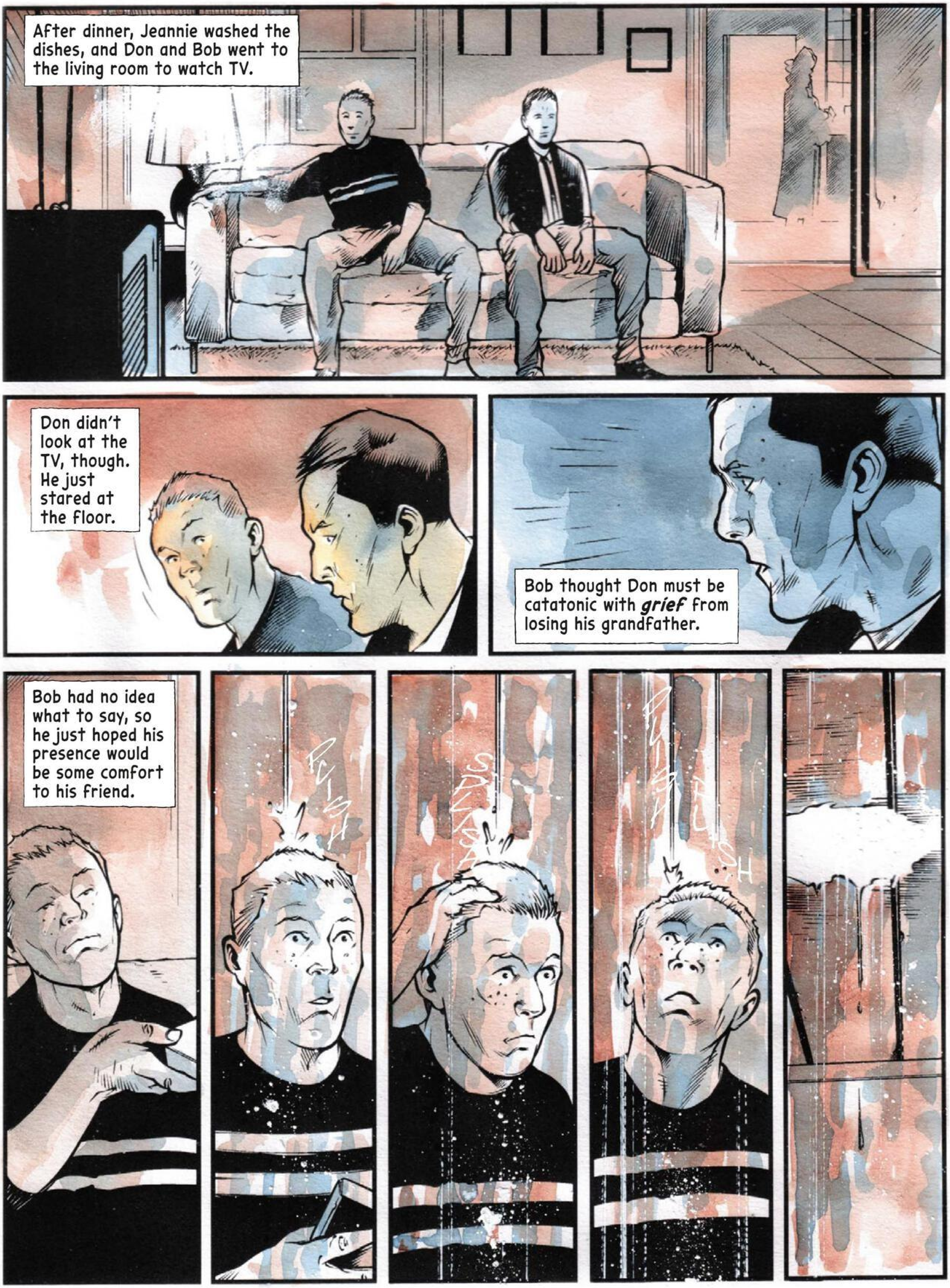

On February 24, 1983, ***Don Decker*** walked into the funeral home in the small, rural town of Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania.
At the front of the room, his grandfather's casket was open for viewing.
A heavy, almost ***sickly-sweet*** smell of flowers hung over everything.
Family and friends were quietly crying and consoling one another.
Don sat in the last row and ***scowled.*** Unlike everyone else, he was not remotely sad.
He was totally ***angry.***

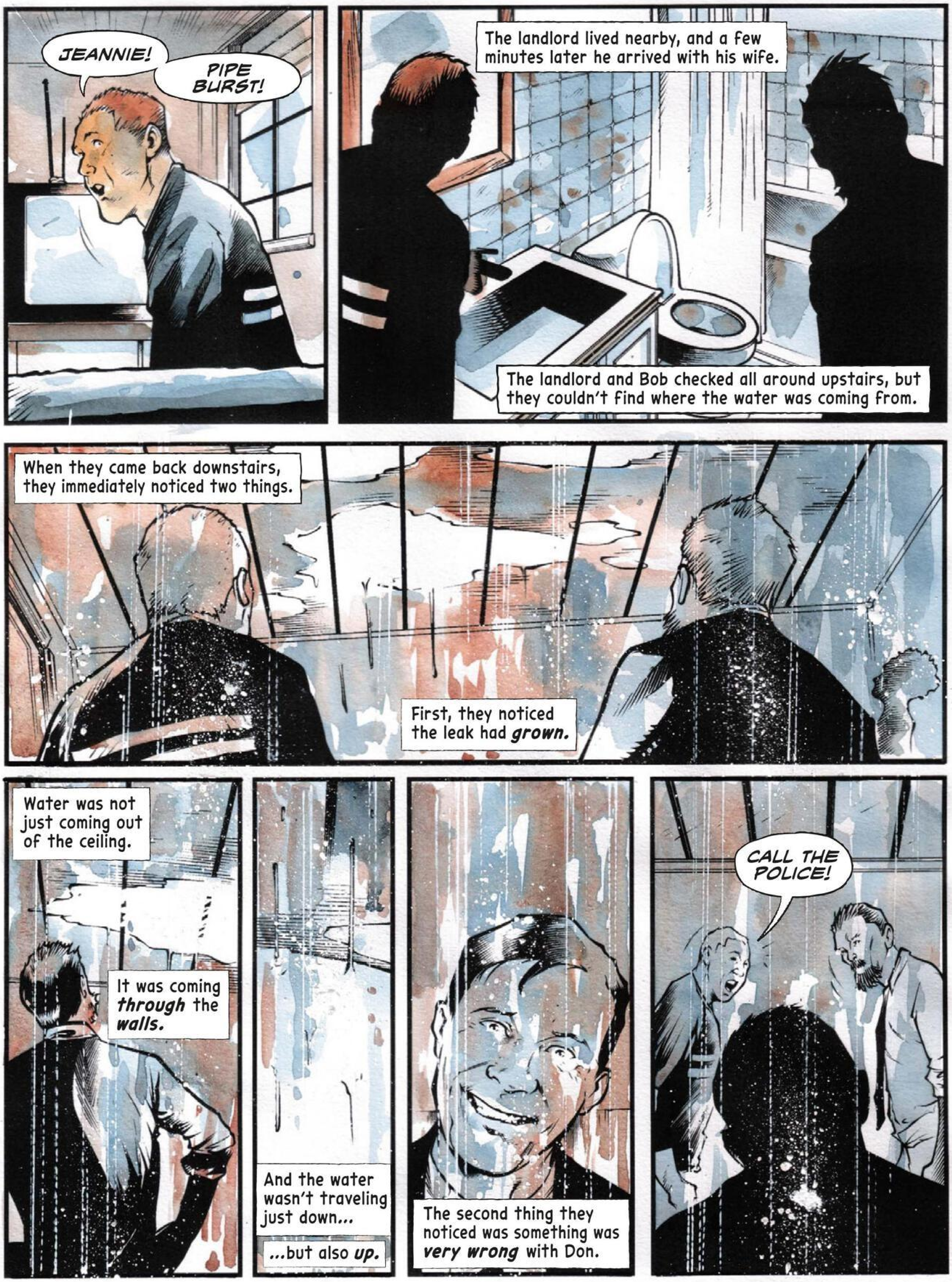

Don had come from the ***Monroe County Correctional Facility,*** where he was serving a sentence for receiving stolen property.
The jail had granted him a furlough to attend the funeral.
He had jumped at the opportunity, mostly to get out of jail for a bit.
Now that he was at the funeral, though, he ***regretted*** coming.
The service began with family members going up to the podium and saying nice things about his grandfather.
At first, Don put up with it...
...but after the first couple of people had spoken, he was ***livid.*** He just couldn't listen anymore.
So he focused his attention on his grandfather's face instead.

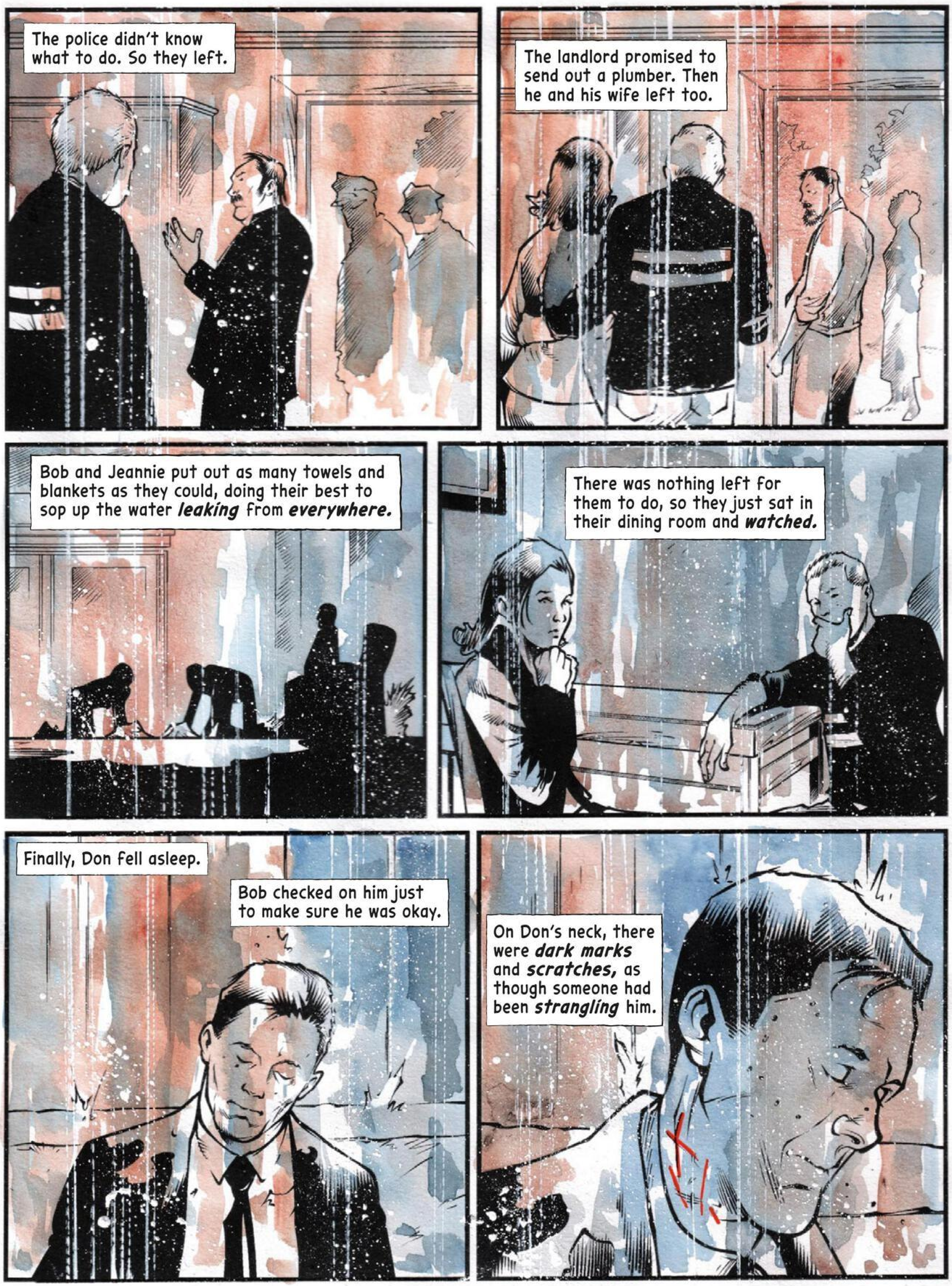

HE MOVED!
HE MOVED!

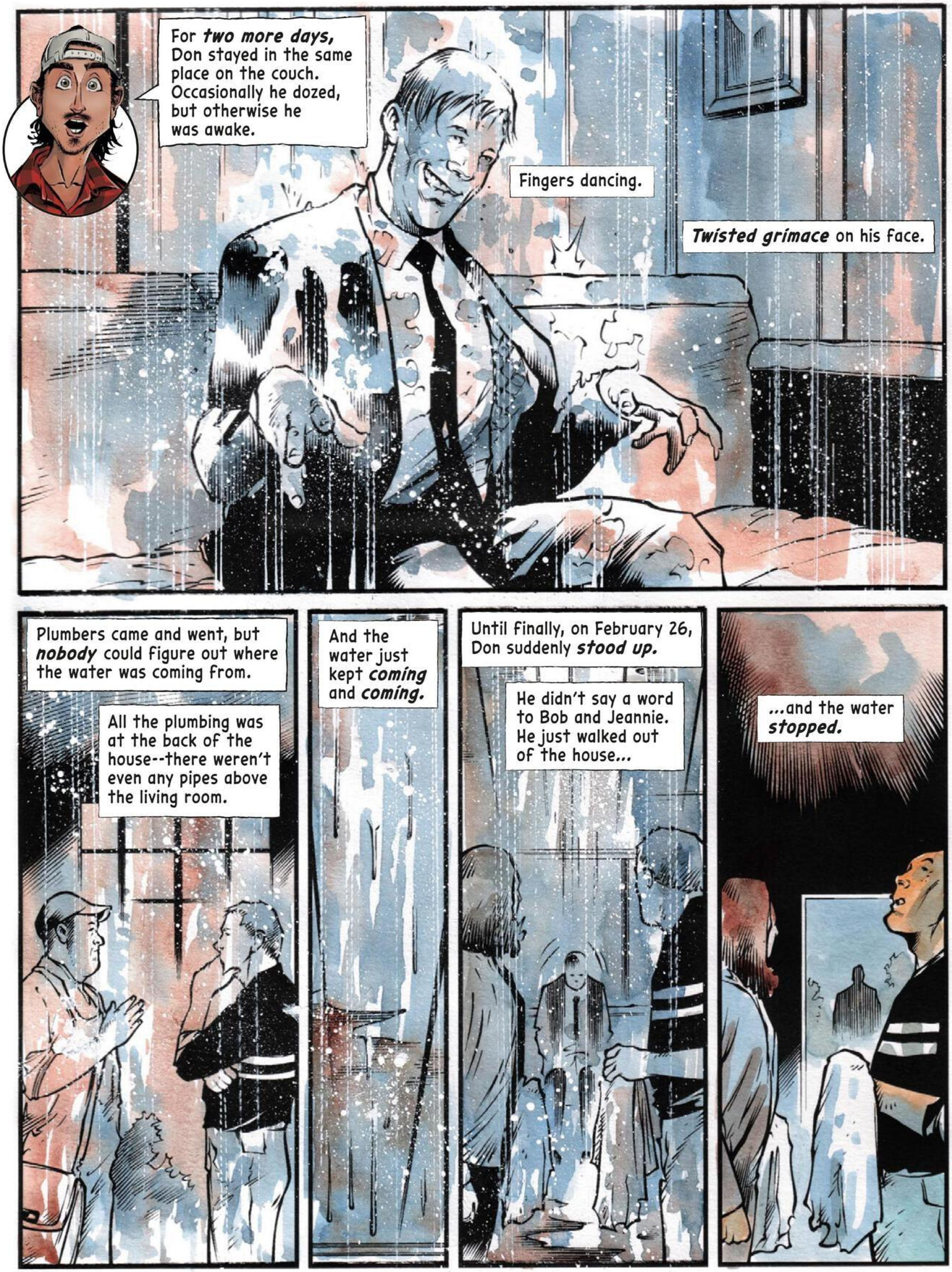

Don thought about joining his family after the funeral, but he just couldn't face being around that crowd again.
Instead, he went to the home of his friends Bob and Jeannie.
He knew they were laid-back people who would let him have some *peace* and *quiet* until he needed to report back to jail.
In the upstairs bathroom, Don splashed cold water on his face, because he still couldn't shake the *anger* he felt at the funeral.
The water relaxed him. He felt cooler.
In fact, the whole bathroom seemed to have a coolness descend on it.
Then, as he was looking in the mirror, he realized the bathroom was *uncomfortably* cold.
Too cold.

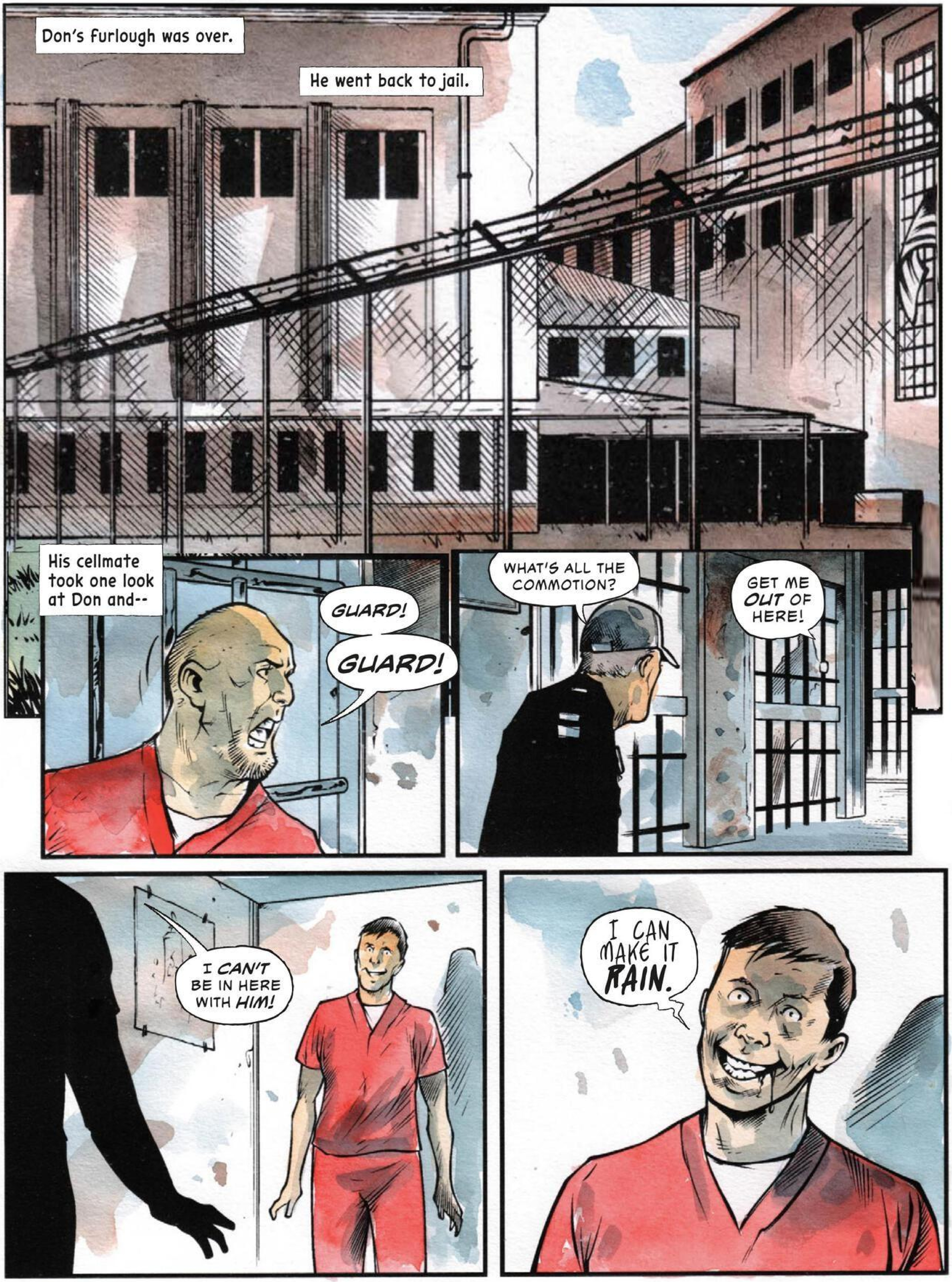

Don was certain he'd ***seen someone*** in the mirror's reflection--
--but no one was there.

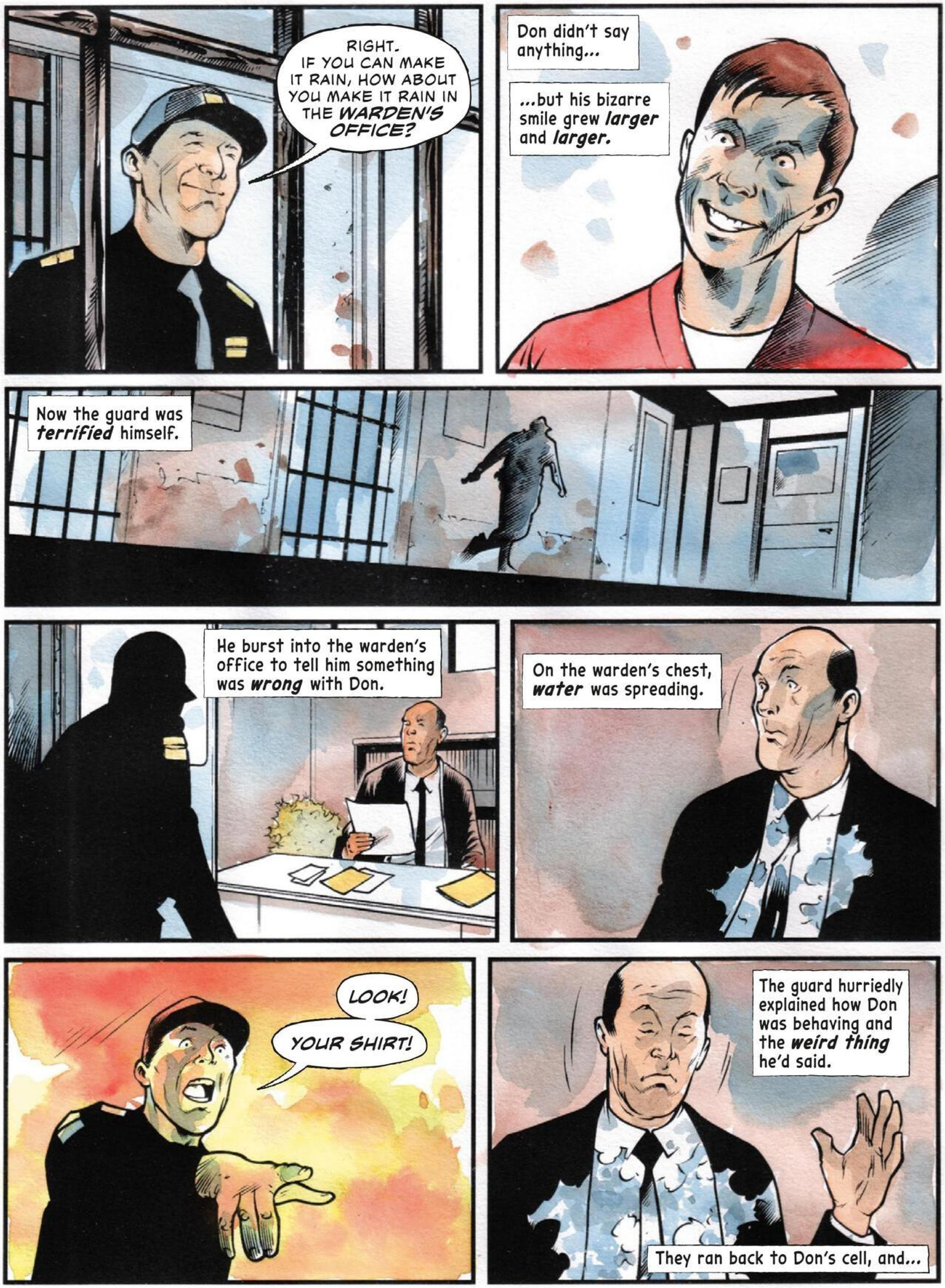

After dinner, Jeannie washed the dishes, and Don and Bob went to the living room to watch TV.
Don didn't look at the TV, though. He just stared at the floor.
Bob thought Don must be catatonic with ***grief*** from losing his grandfather.
Bob had no idea what to say, so he just hoped his presence would be some comfort to his friend.
PLISH
SPLISH
PLISH PLISH


JEANNIE!
PIPE BURST!
The landlord lived nearby, and a few minutes later he arrived with his wife.
The landlord and Bob checked all around upstairs, but they couldn't find where the water was coming from.
When they came back downstairs, they immediately noticed two things.
First, they noticed the leak had *grown.*
Water was not just coming out of the ceiling.
It was coming *through* the *walls.*
And the water wasn't traveling just down...
...but also *up.*
The second thing they noticed was something was *very wrong* with Don.
CALL THE POLICE!

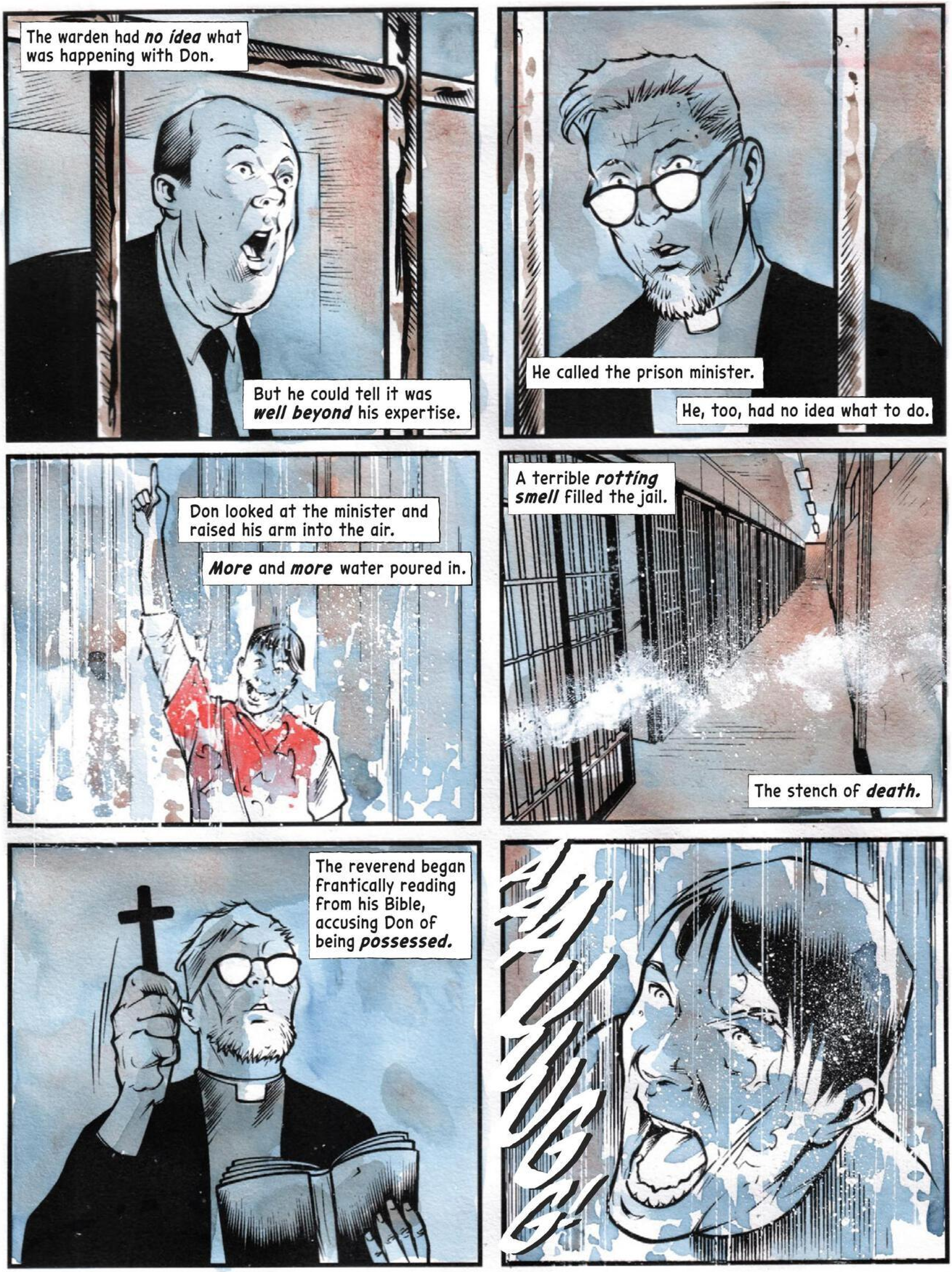

The police didn't know what to do. So they left.
The landlord promised to send out a plumber. Then he and his wife left too.
Bob and Jeannie put out as many towels and blankets as they could, doing their best to sop up the water *leaking* from *everywhere.*
There was nothing left for them to do, so they just sat in their dining room and *watched.*
Finally, Don fell asleep.
Bob checked on him just to make sure he was okay.
On Don's neck, there were *dark marks* and *scratches,* as though someone had been *strangling* him.

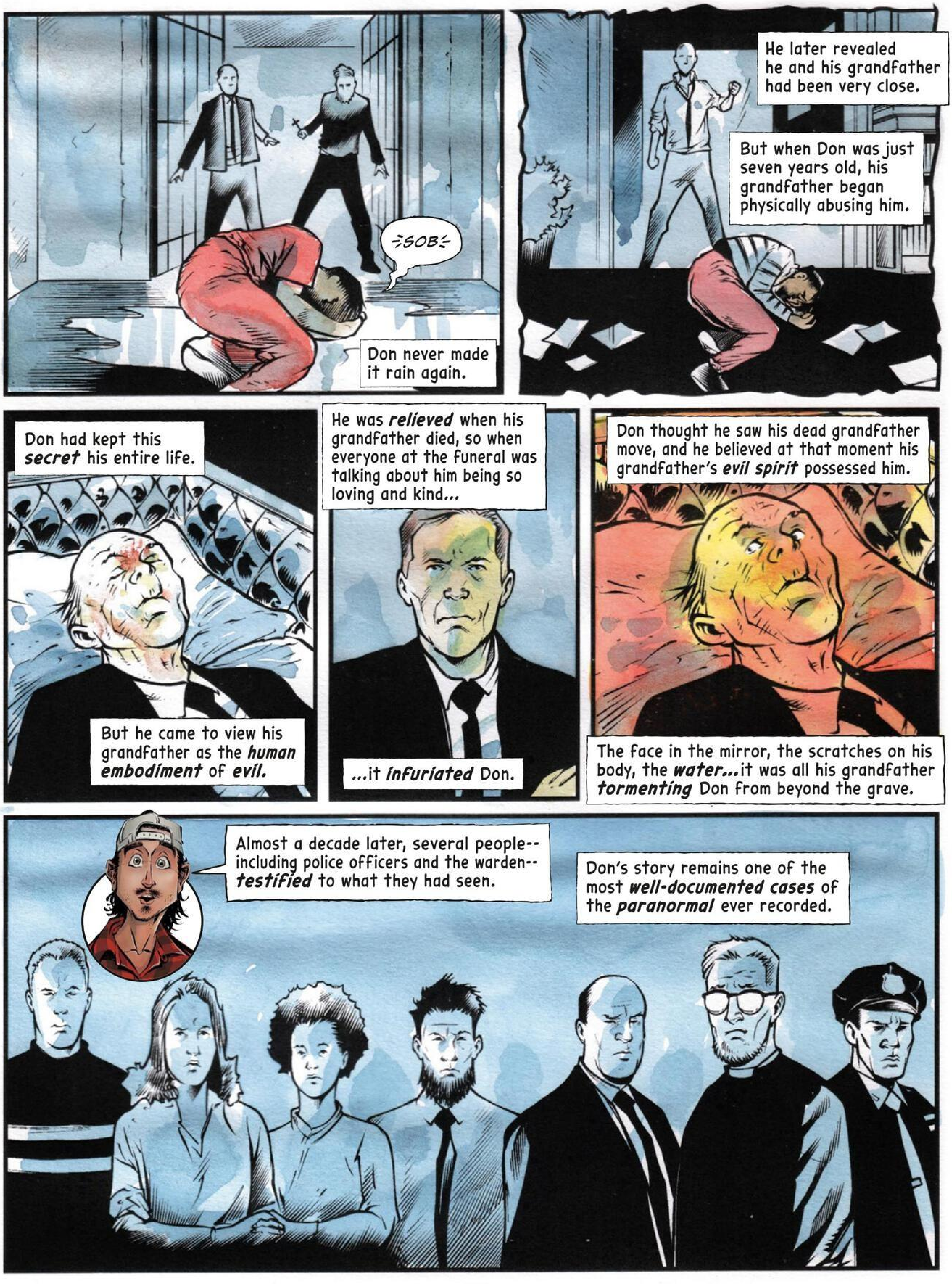

For *two more days,* Don stayed in the same place on the couch. Occasionally he dozed, but otherwise he was awake.
Fingers dancing.
Twisted grimace on his face.
Plumbers came and went, but *nobody* could figure out where the water was coming from.
All the plumbing was at the back of the house--there weren't even any pipes above the living room.
And the water just kept *coming* and *coming.*
Until finally, on February 26, Don suddenly *stood up.*
He didn't say a word to Bob and Jeannie. He just walked out of the house...
...and the water *stopped.*


Don's furlough was over.
He went back to jail.
His cellmate took one look at Don and--
GUARD!
GUARD!
WHAT'S ALL THE COMMOTION?
GET ME OUT OF HERE!
I CAN'T BE IN HERE WITH HIM!
I CAN MAKE IT RAIN.

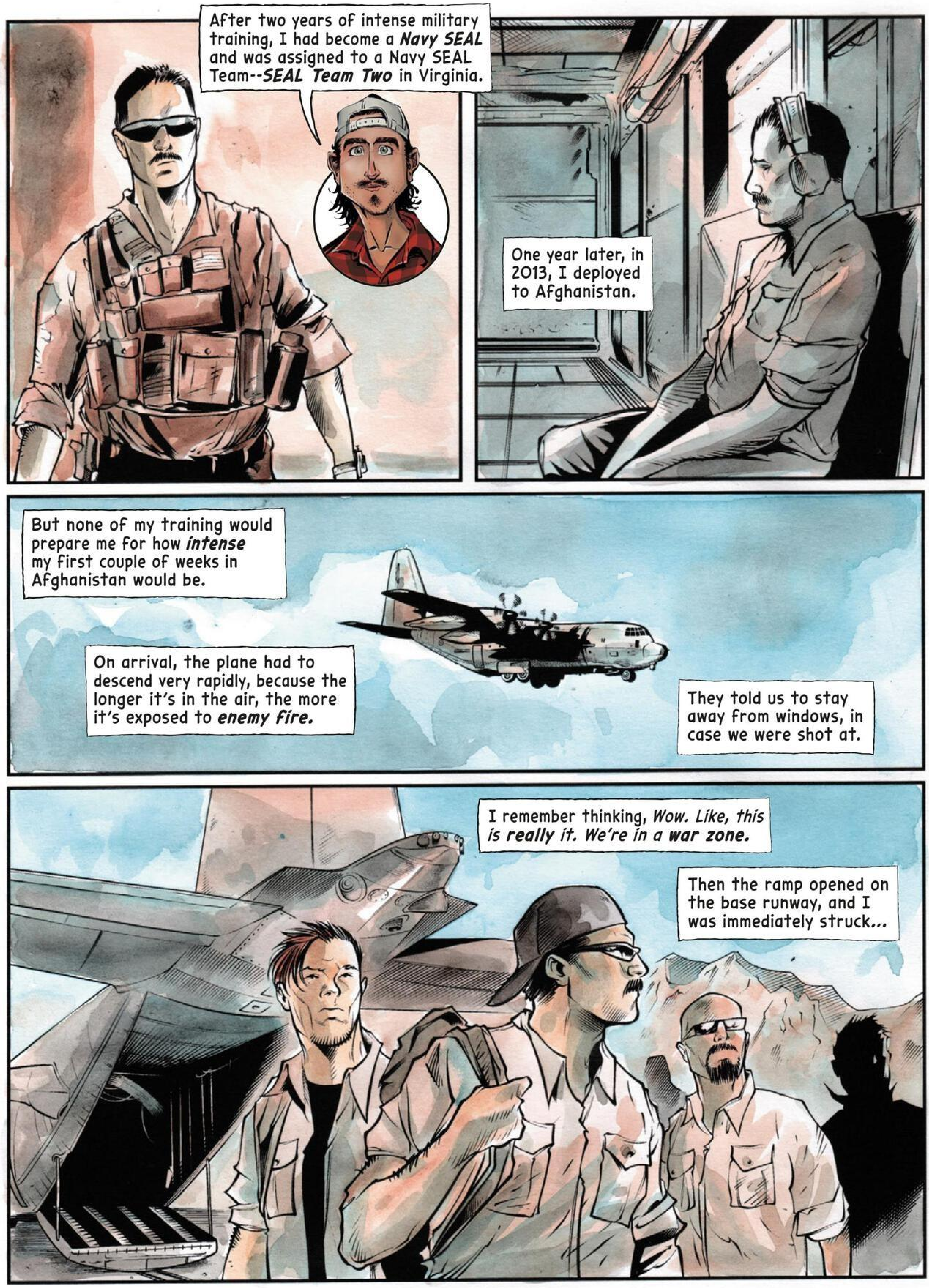

RIGHT. IF YOU CAN MAKE IT RAIN, HOW ABOUT YOU MAKE IT RAIN IN THE *WARDEN'S OFFICE?*
Don didn't say anything...
...but his bizarre smile grew *larger* and *larger.*
Now the guard was *terrified* himself.
He burst into the warden's office to tell him something was *wrong* with Don.
On the warden's chest, *water* was spreading.
LOOK!
YOUR SHIRT!
The guard hurriedly explained how Don was behaving and the *weird thing* he'd said.
They ran back to Don's cell, and...

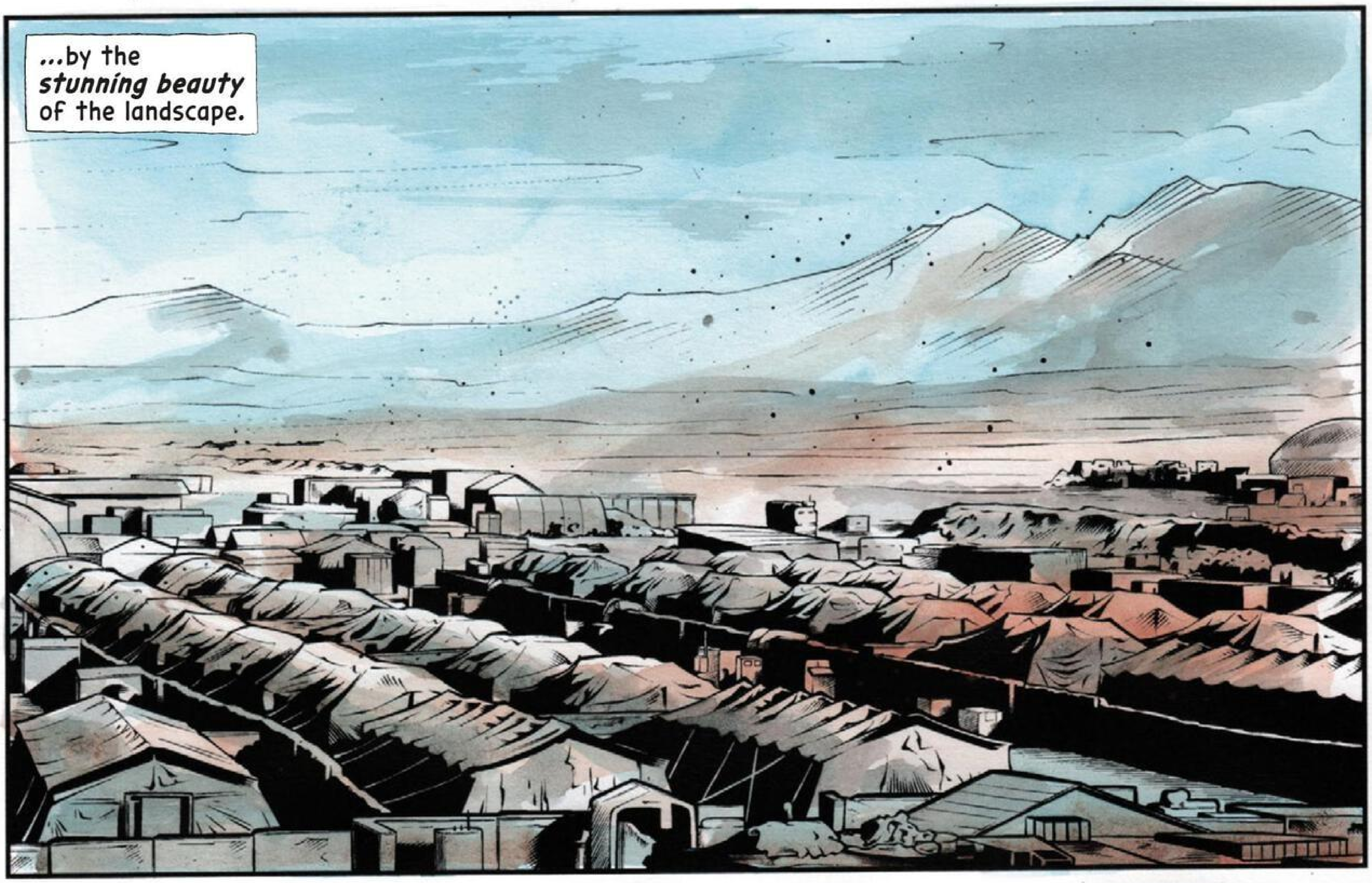
SPLISH
PLISH
SPLISH
SPLISH
SPLISH
PLISH
PLISH

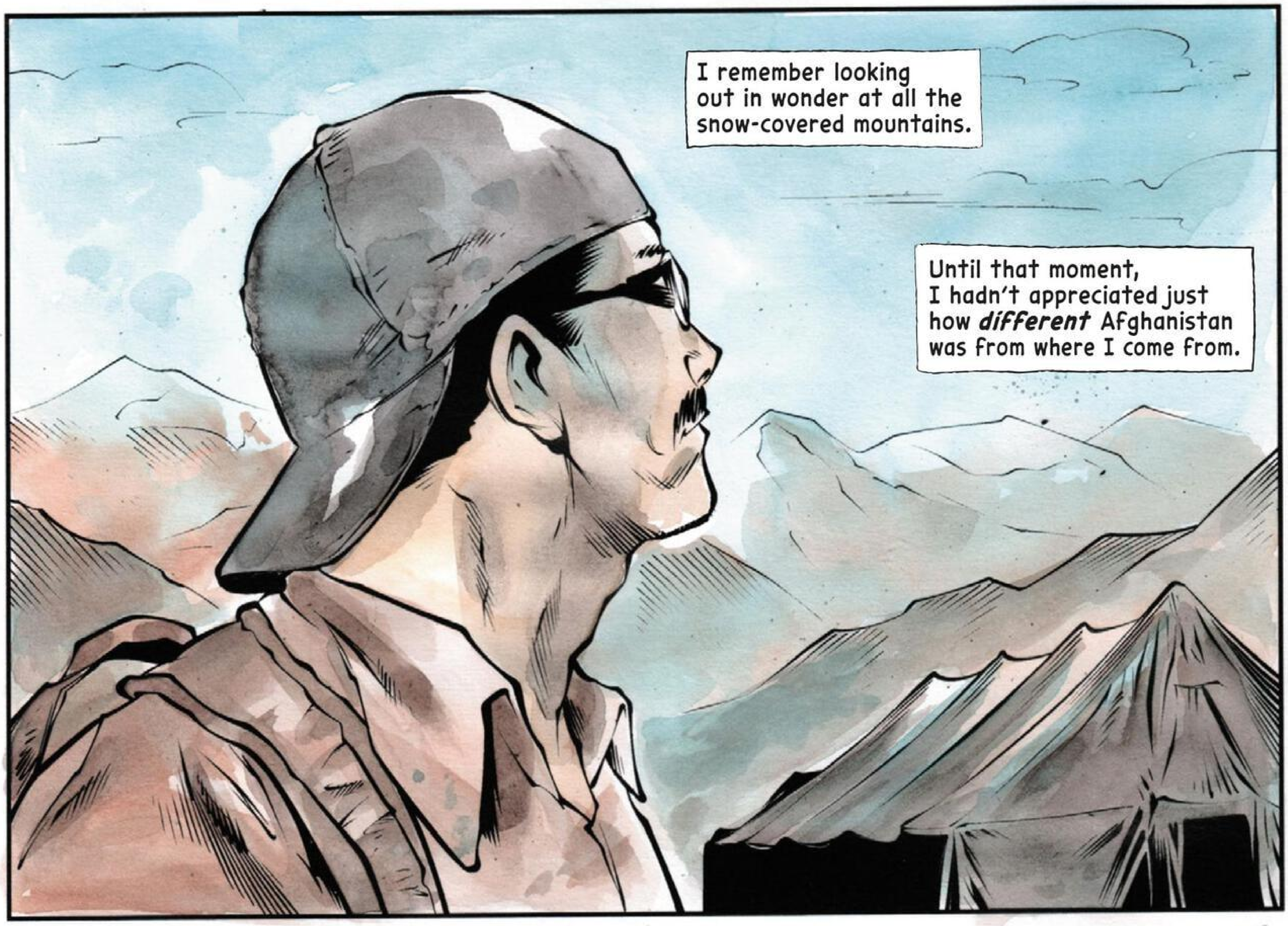

The warden had ***no idea*** what was happening with Don.
But he could tell it was ***well beyond*** his expertise.
He called the prison minister.
He, too, had no idea what to do.
Don looked at the minister and raised his arm into the air.
More and ***more*** water poured in.
A terrible ***rotting smell*** filled the jail.
The stench of ***death.***
The reverend began frantically reading from his Bible, accusing Don of being ***possessed.***
AAAUUGGG!

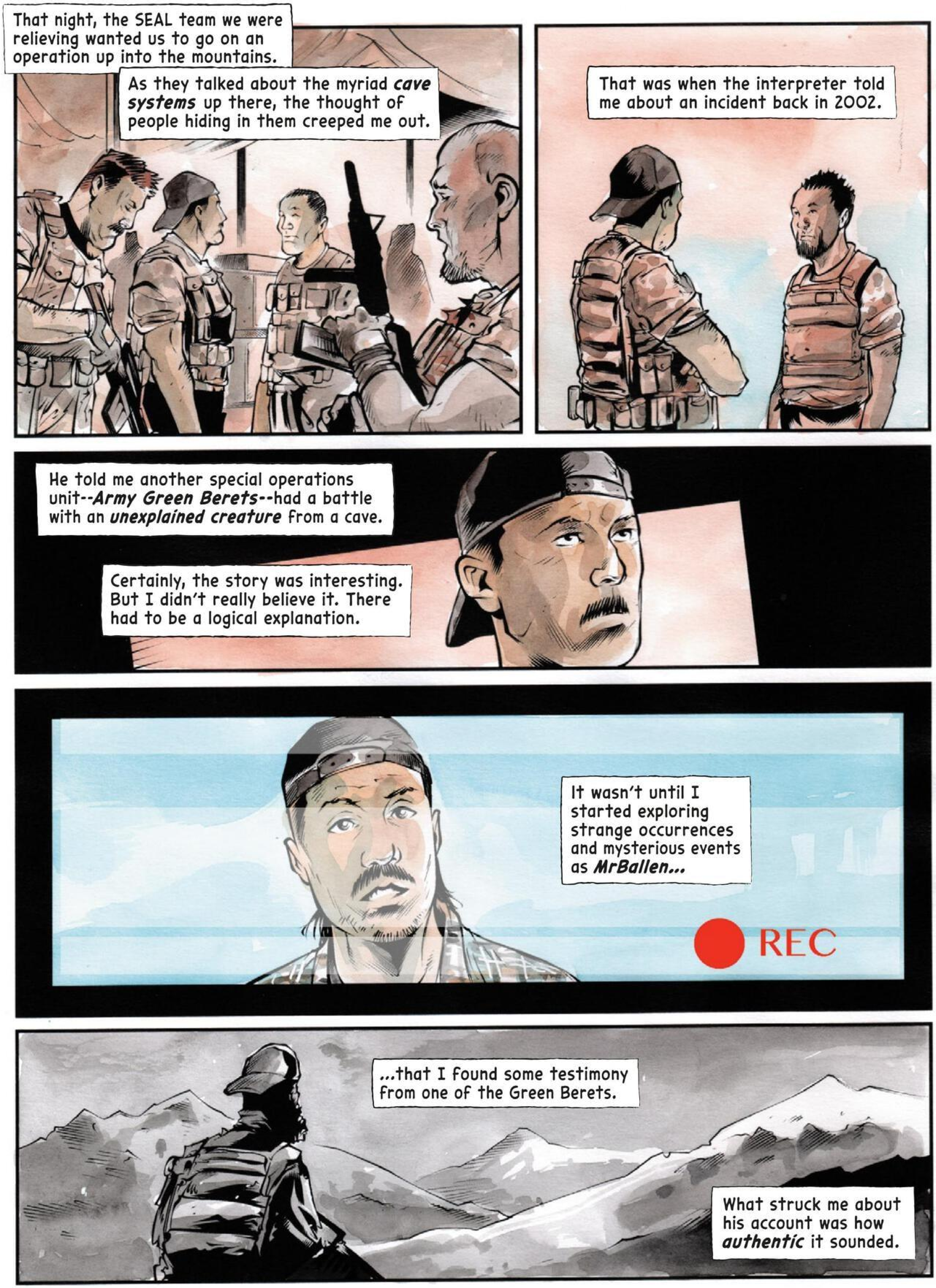

-SOB-
Don never made it rain again.
He later revealed he and his grandfather had been very close.
But when Don was just seven years old, his grandfather began physically abusing him.
Don had kept this *secret* his entire life.
But he came to view his grandfather as the *human embodiment* of *evil.*
He was *relieved* when his grandfather died, so when everyone at the funeral was talking about him being so loving and kind...
...it *infuriated* Don.
Don thought he saw his dead grandfather move, and he believed at that moment his grandfather's *evil spirit* possessed him.
The face in the mirror, the scratches on his body, the *water...*it was all his grandfather *tormenting* Don from beyond the grave.
Almost a decade later, several people--including police officers and the warden--*testified* to what they had seen.
Don's story remains one of the most *well-documented cases* of the *paranormal* ever recorded.

THE KANDAHAR GIANT

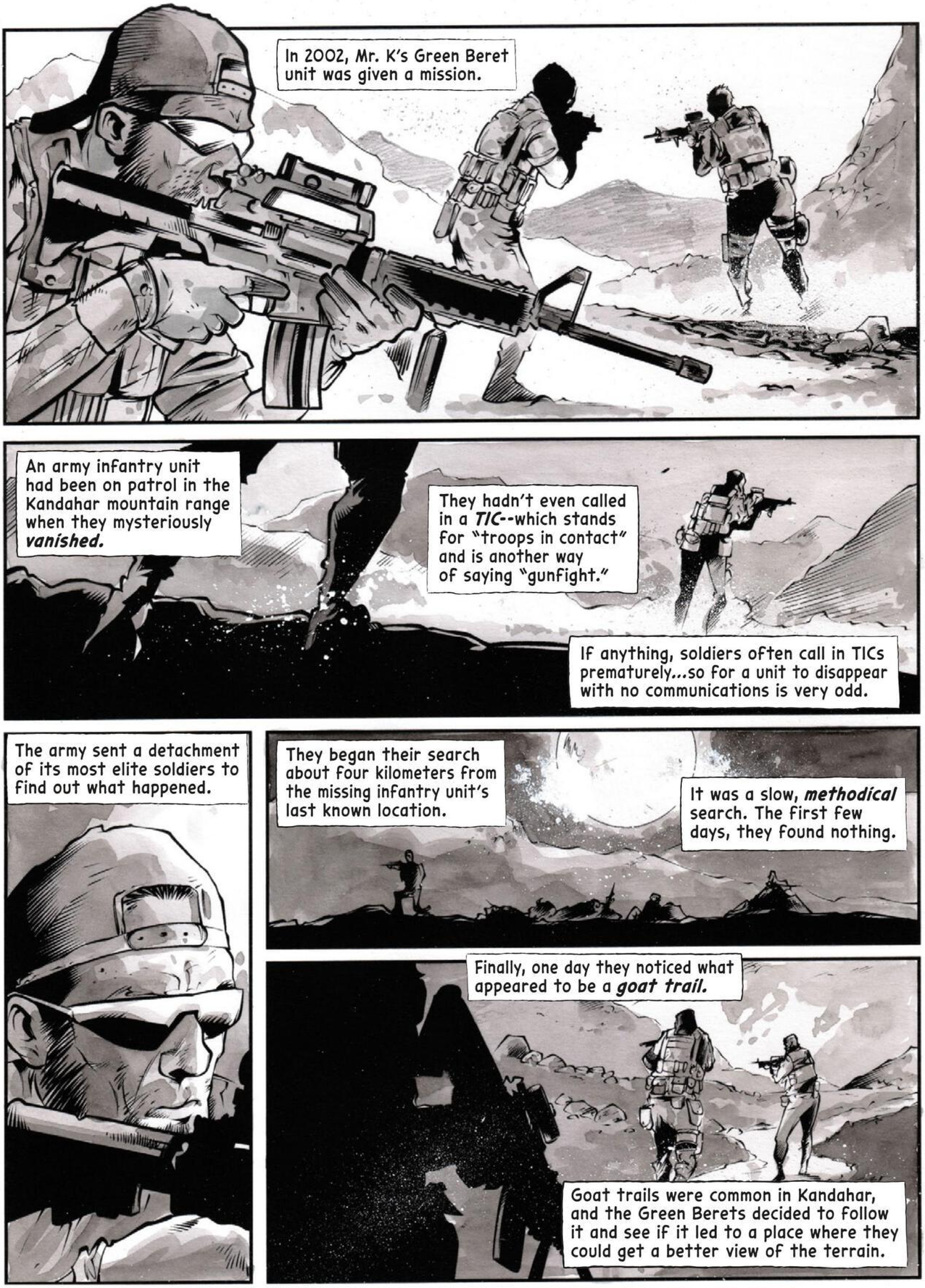

After two years of intense military training, I had become a ***Navy SEAL*** and was assigned to a Navy SEAL Team--***SEAL Team Two*** in Virginia.
One year later, in 2013, I deployed to Afghanistan.
But none of my training would prepare me for how ***intense*** my first couple of weeks in Afghanistan would be.
On arrival, the plane had to descend very rapidly, because the longer it's in the air, the more it's exposed to ***enemy fire.***
They told us to stay away from windows, in case we were shot at.
I remember thinking, *Wow. Like, this is **really** it. We're in a **war zone.***
Then the ramp opened on the base runway, and I was immediately struck...

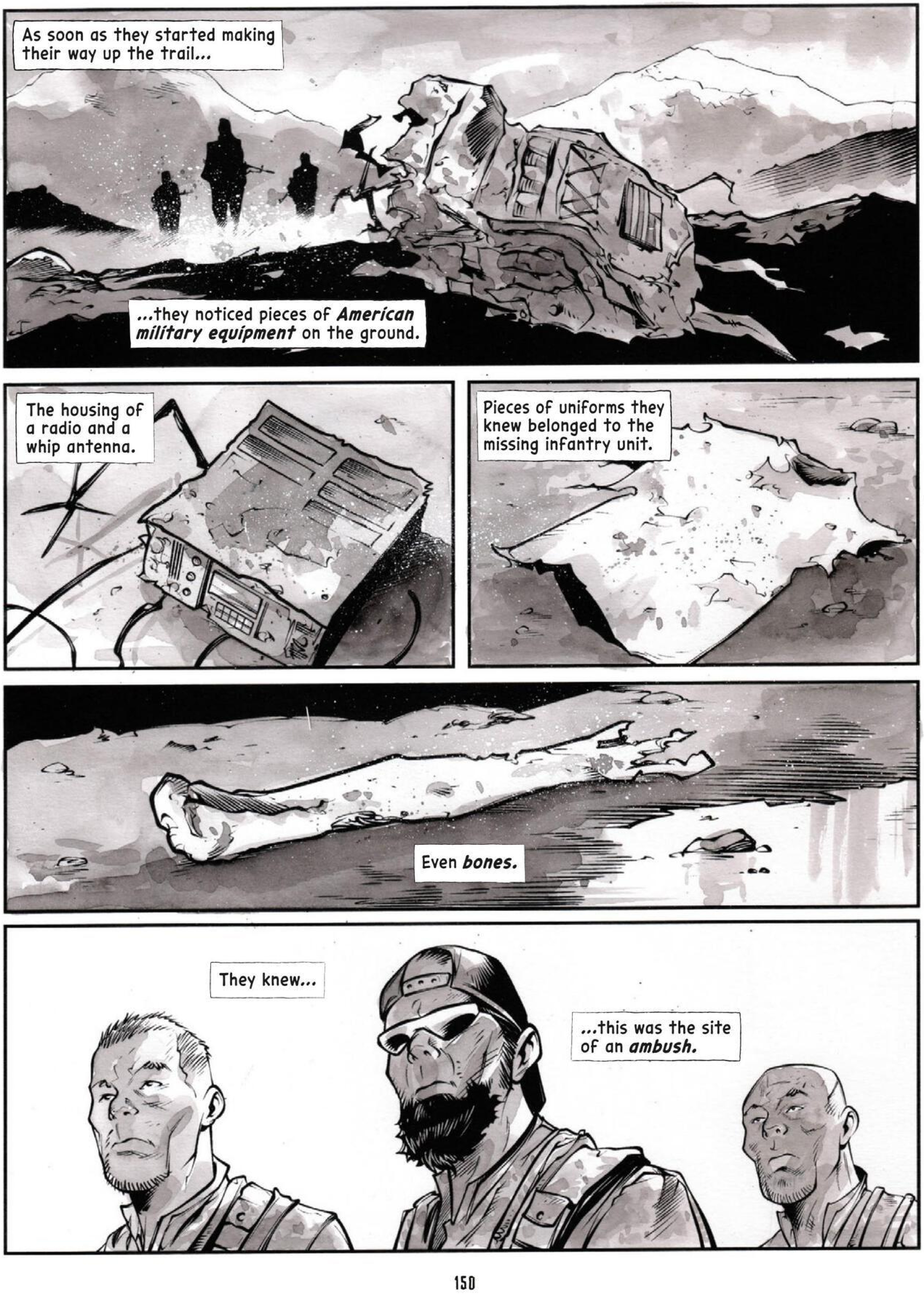

...by the ***stunning beauty*** of the landscape.

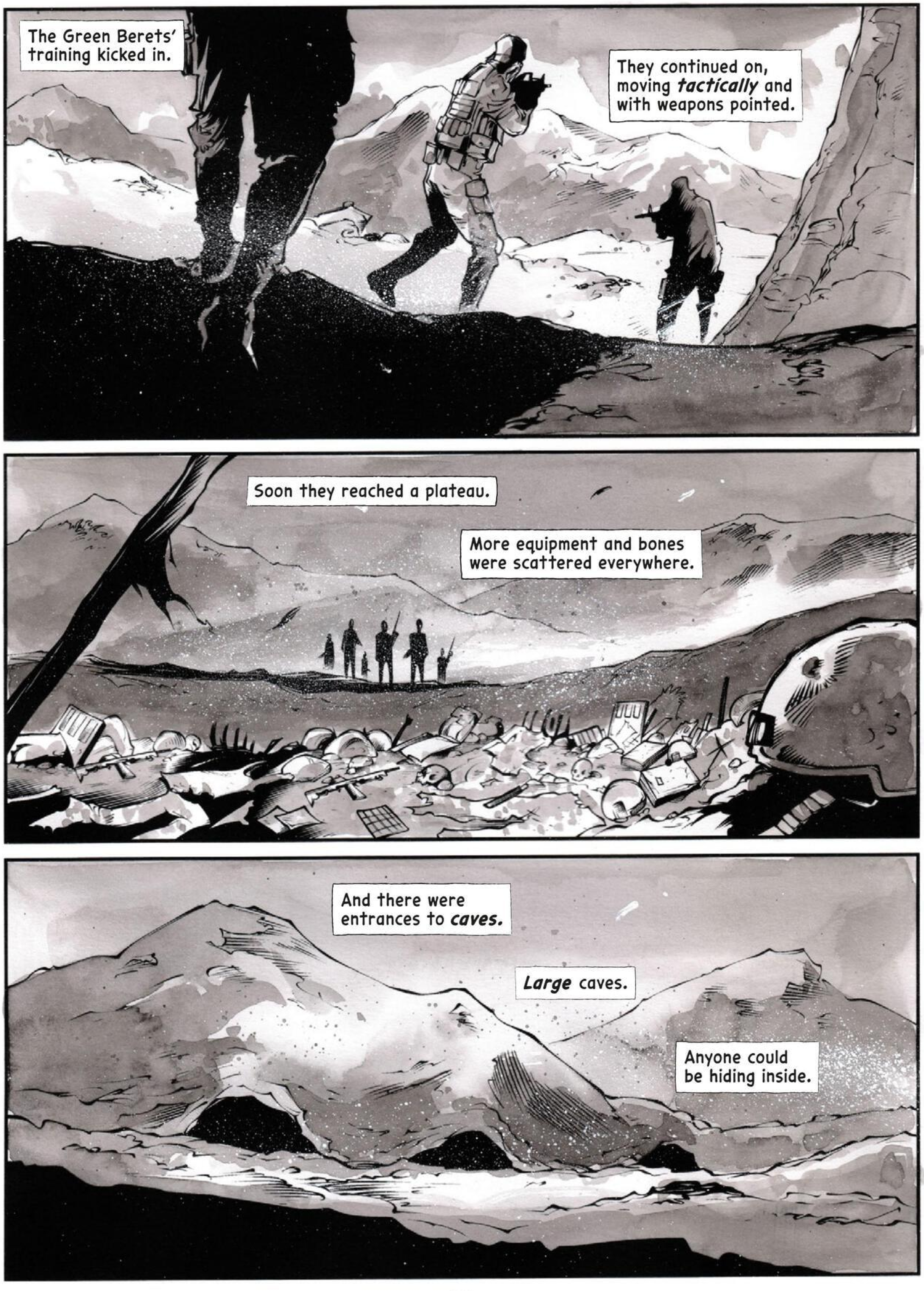

I remember looking out in wonder at all the snow-covered mountains.
Until that moment, I hadn't appreciated just how ***different*** Afghanistan was from where I come from.

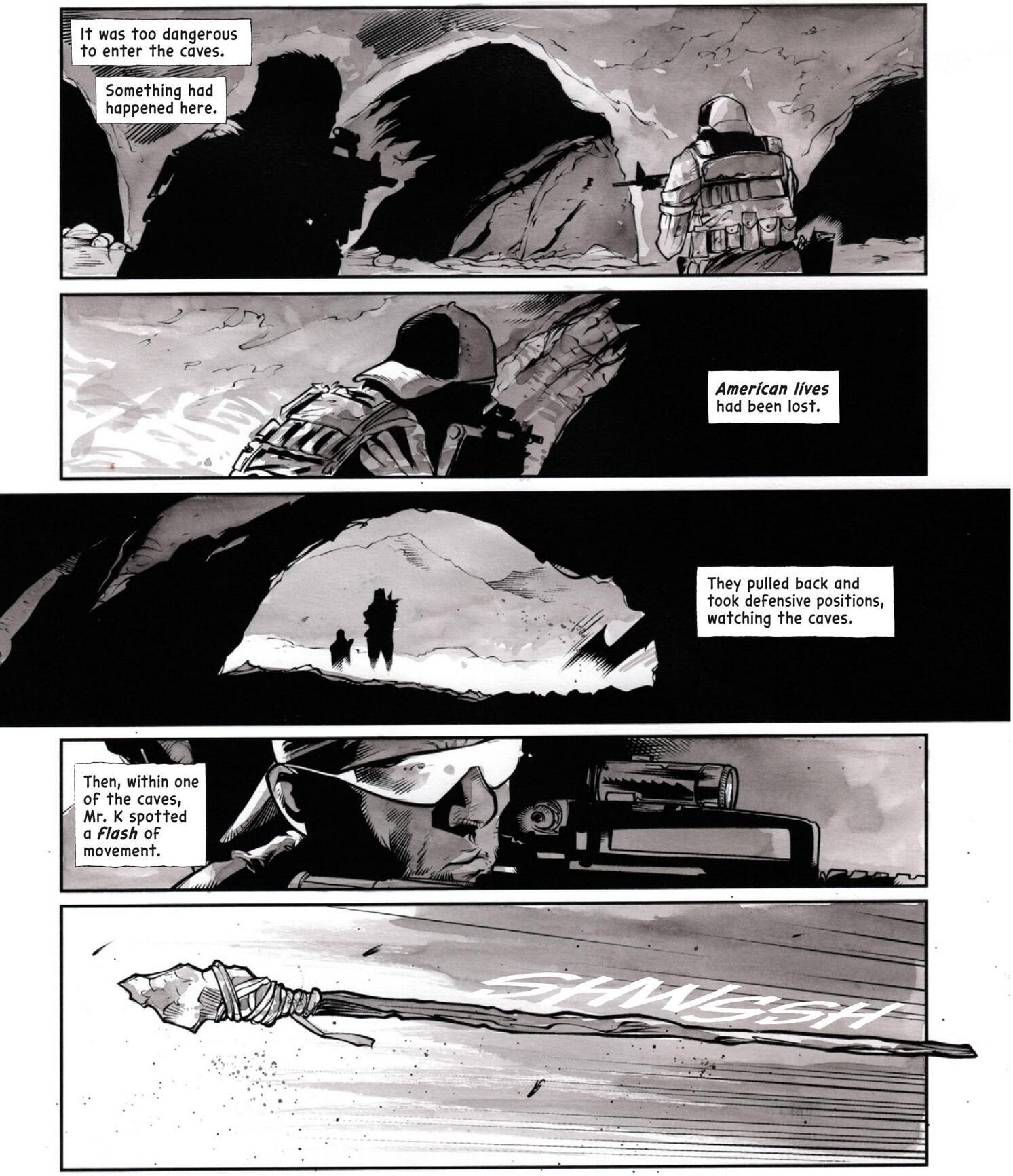

That night, the SEAL team we were relieving wanted us to go on an operation up into the mountains.
As they talked about the myriad *cave systems* up there, the thought of people hiding in them creeped me out.
That was when the interpreter told me about an incident back in 2002.
He told me another special operations unit--*Army Green Berets*--had a battle with an *unexplained creature* from a cave.
Certainly, the story was interesting. But I didn't really believe it. There had to be a logical explanation.
It wasn't until I started exploring strange occurrences and mysterious events as *MrBallen...*
REC
...that I found some testimony from one of the Green Berets.
What struck me about his account was how *authentic* it sounded.

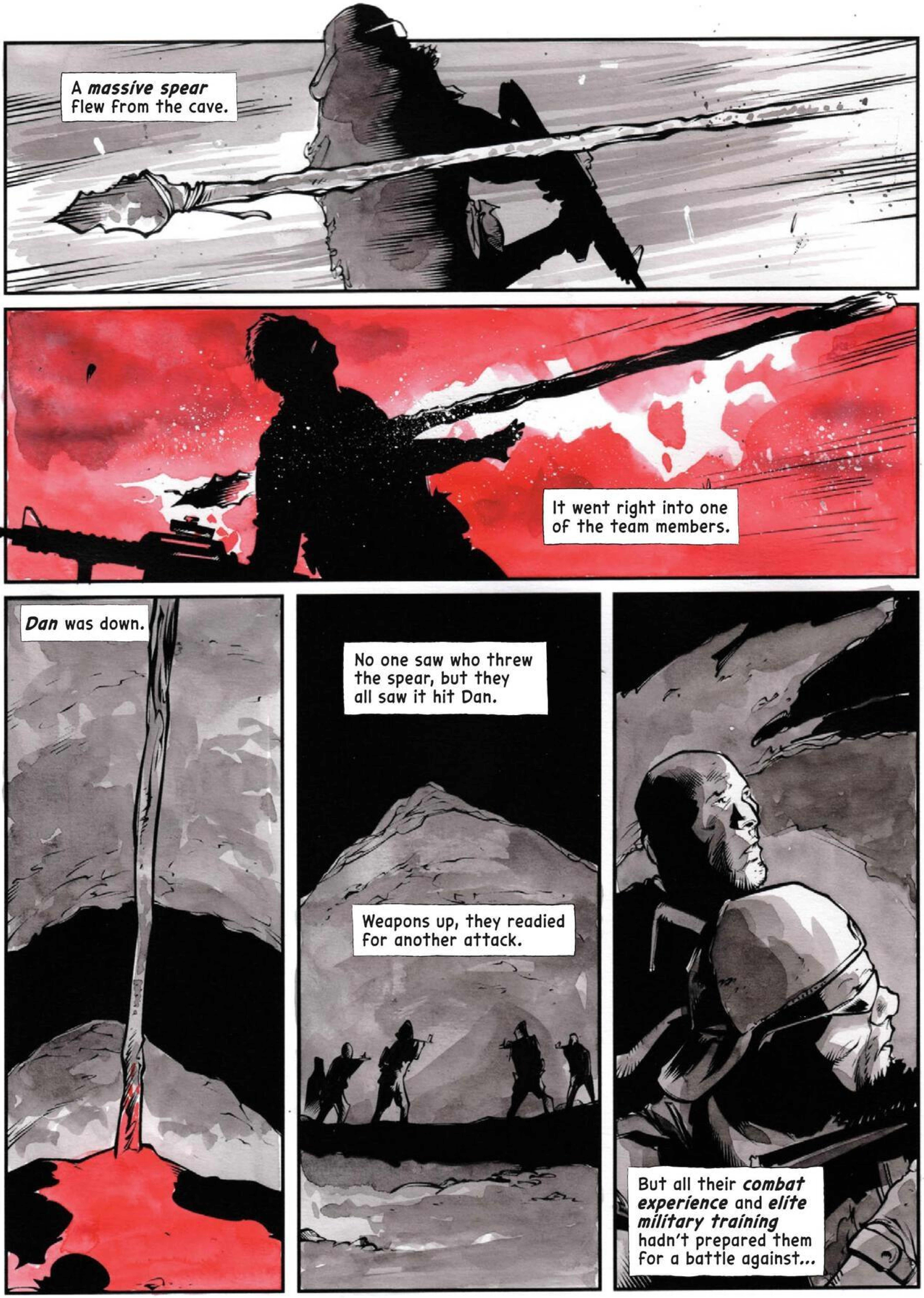
He came forward anonymously, calling himself **Mr. K.**
This is his story.

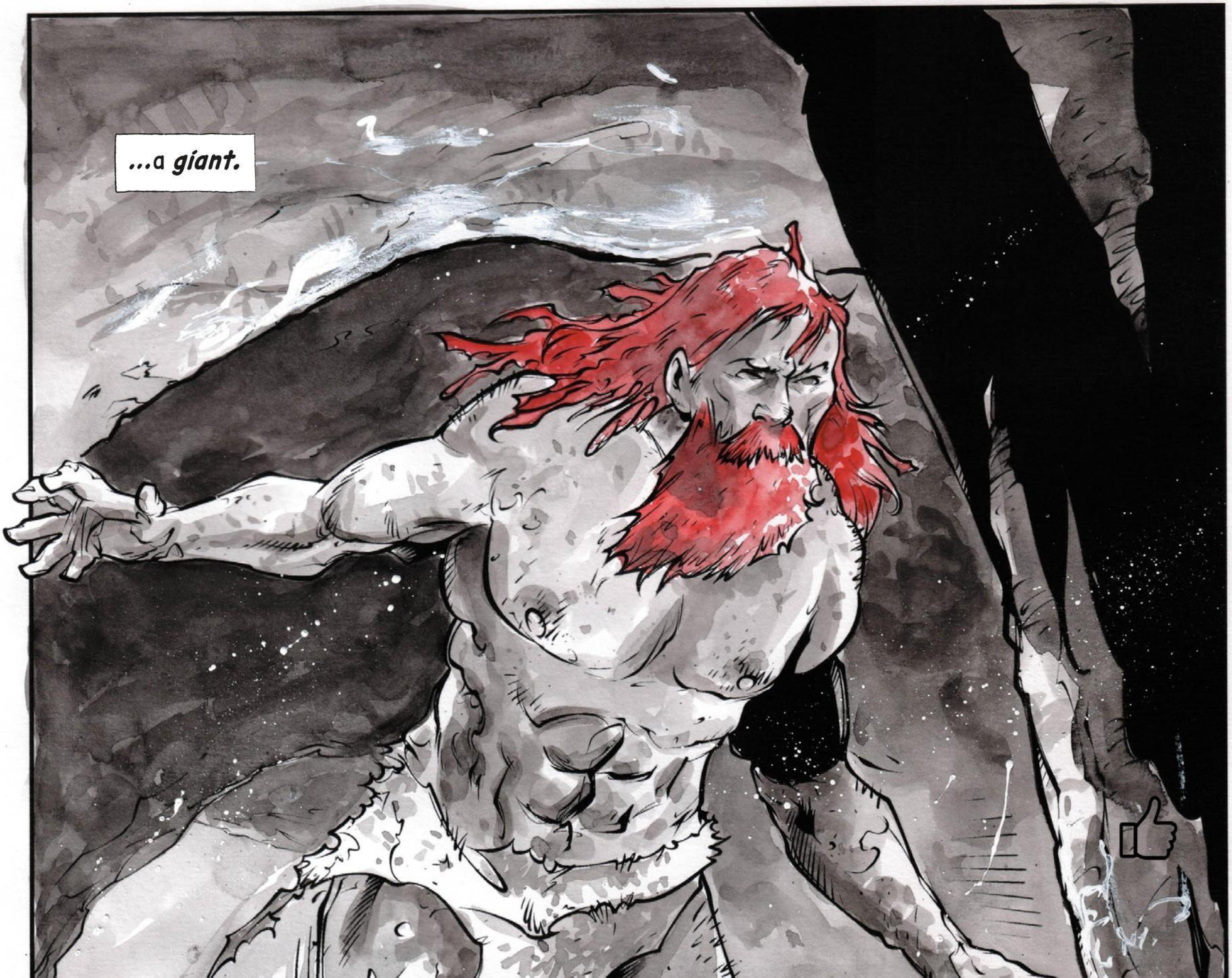

In 2002, Mr. K's Green Beret unit was given a mission.
An army infantry unit had been on patrol in the Kandahar mountain range when they mysteriously ***vanished.***
They hadn't even called in a ***TIC***--which stands for "troops in contact" and is another way of saying "gunfight."
If anything, soldiers often call in TICs prematurely...so for a unit to disappear with no communications is very odd.
The army sent a detachment of its most elite soldiers to find out what happened.
They began their search about four kilometers from the missing infantry unit's last known location.
It was a slow, ***methodical*** search. The first few days, they found nothing.
Finally, one day they noticed what appeared to be a ***goat trail.***
Goat trails were common in Kandahar, and the Green Berets decided to follow it and see if it led to a place where they could get a better view of the terrain.

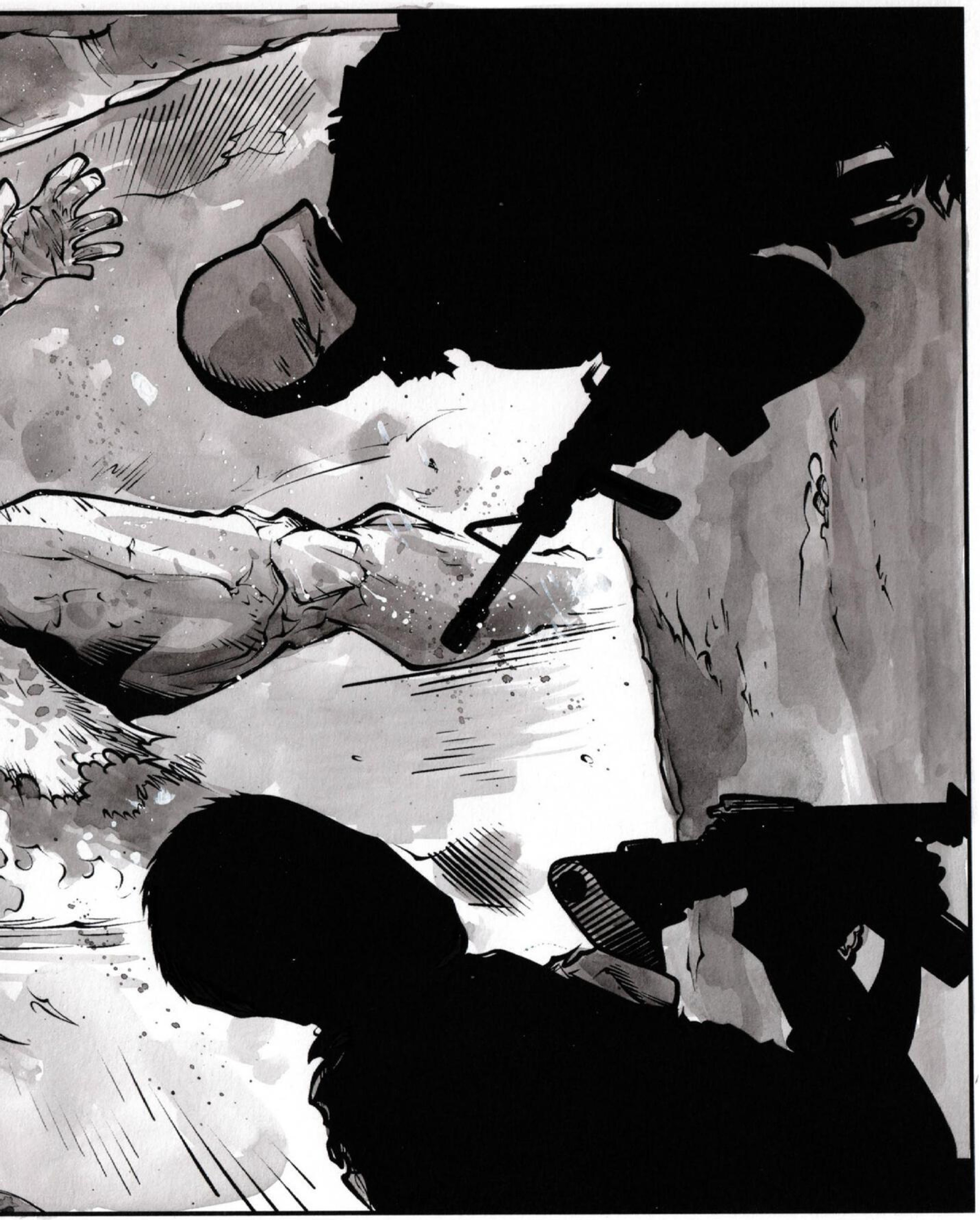

As soon as they started making their way up the trail...
...they noticed pieces of ***American military equipment*** on the ground.
The housing of a radio and a whip antenna.
Pieces of uniforms they knew belonged to the missing infantry unit.
Even ***bones.***
They knew...
...this was the site of an ***ambush.***

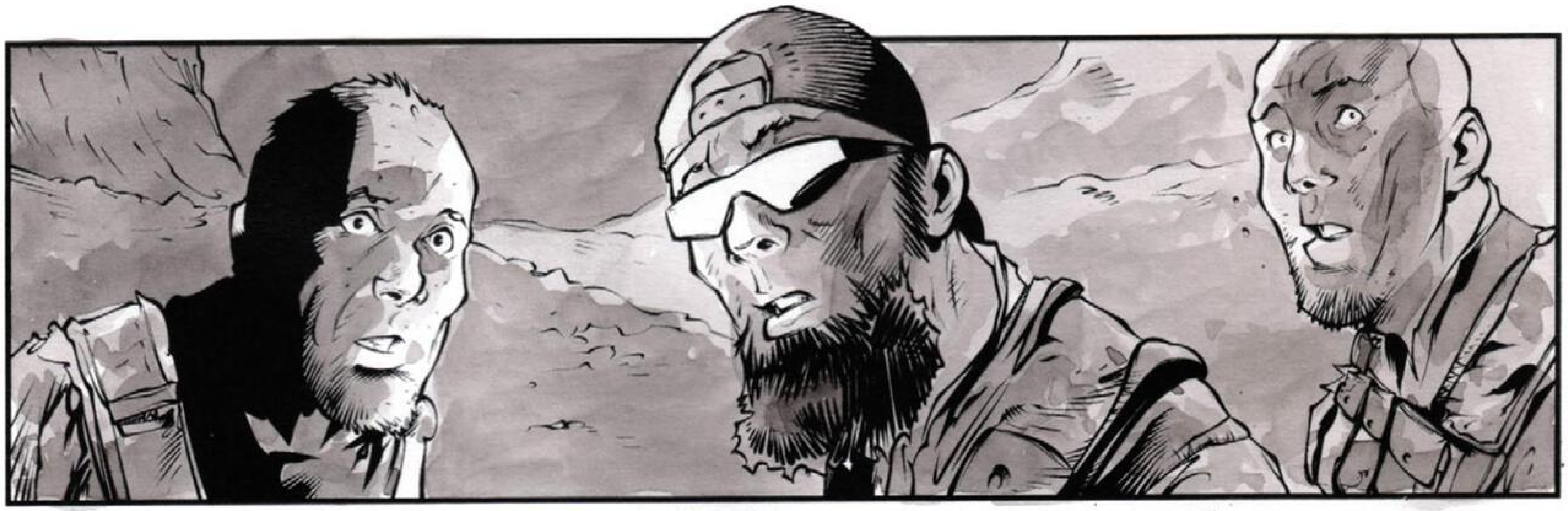

The Green Berets' training kicked in.
They continued on, moving *tactically* and with weapons pointed.
Soon they reached a plateau.
More equipment and bones were scattered everywhere.
And there were entrances to *caves.*
Large caves.
Anyone could be hiding inside.

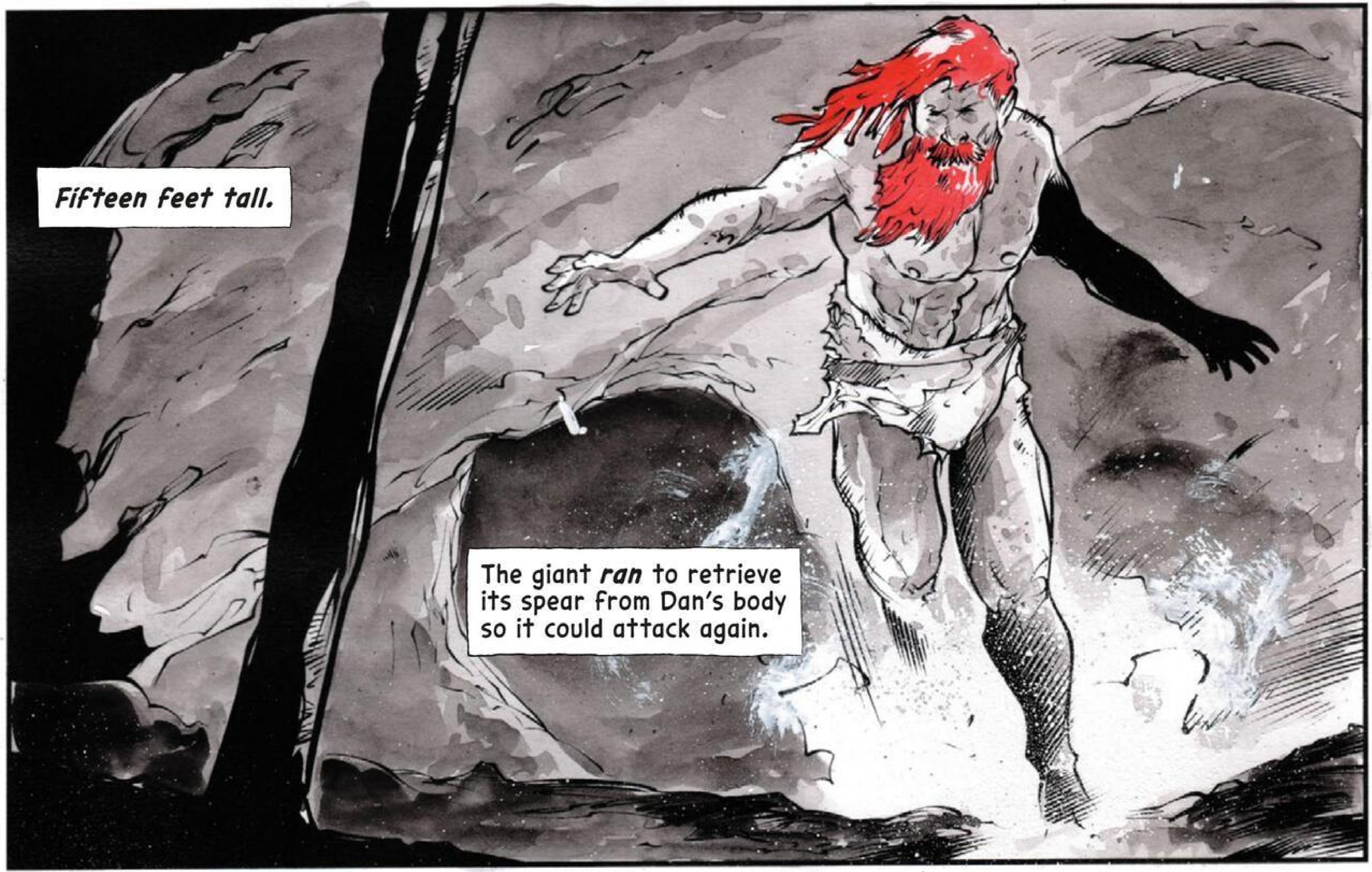

It was too dangerous to enter the caves.
Something had happened here.
American lives had been lost.
They pulled back and took defensive positions, watching the caves.
Then, within one of the caves, Mr. K spotted a *flash* of movement.
SHWSSH

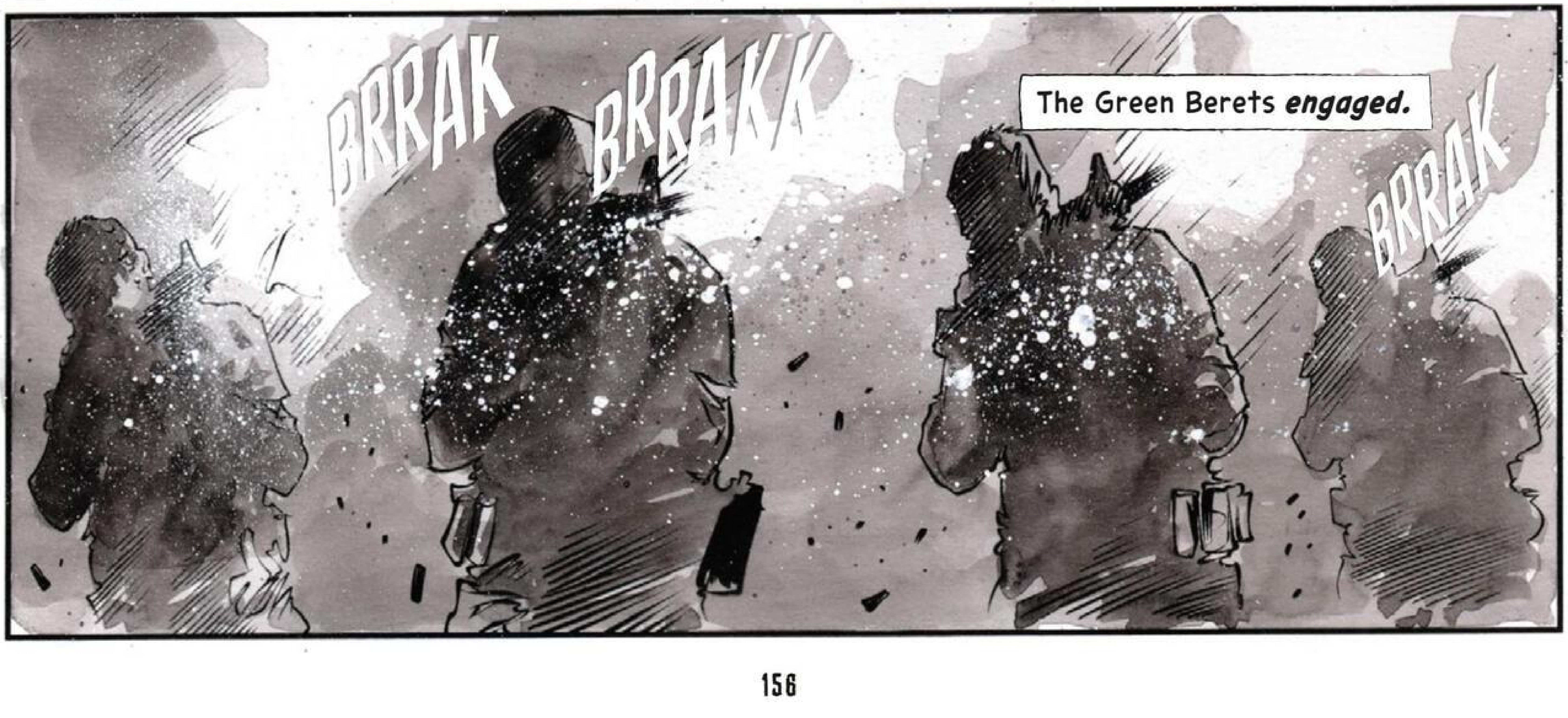

A **massive spear** flew from the cave.
It went right into one of the team members.
Dan was down.
No one saw who threw the spear, but they all saw it hit Dan.
Weapons up, they readied for another attack.
But all their **combat experience** and **elite military training** hadn't prepared them for a battle against...

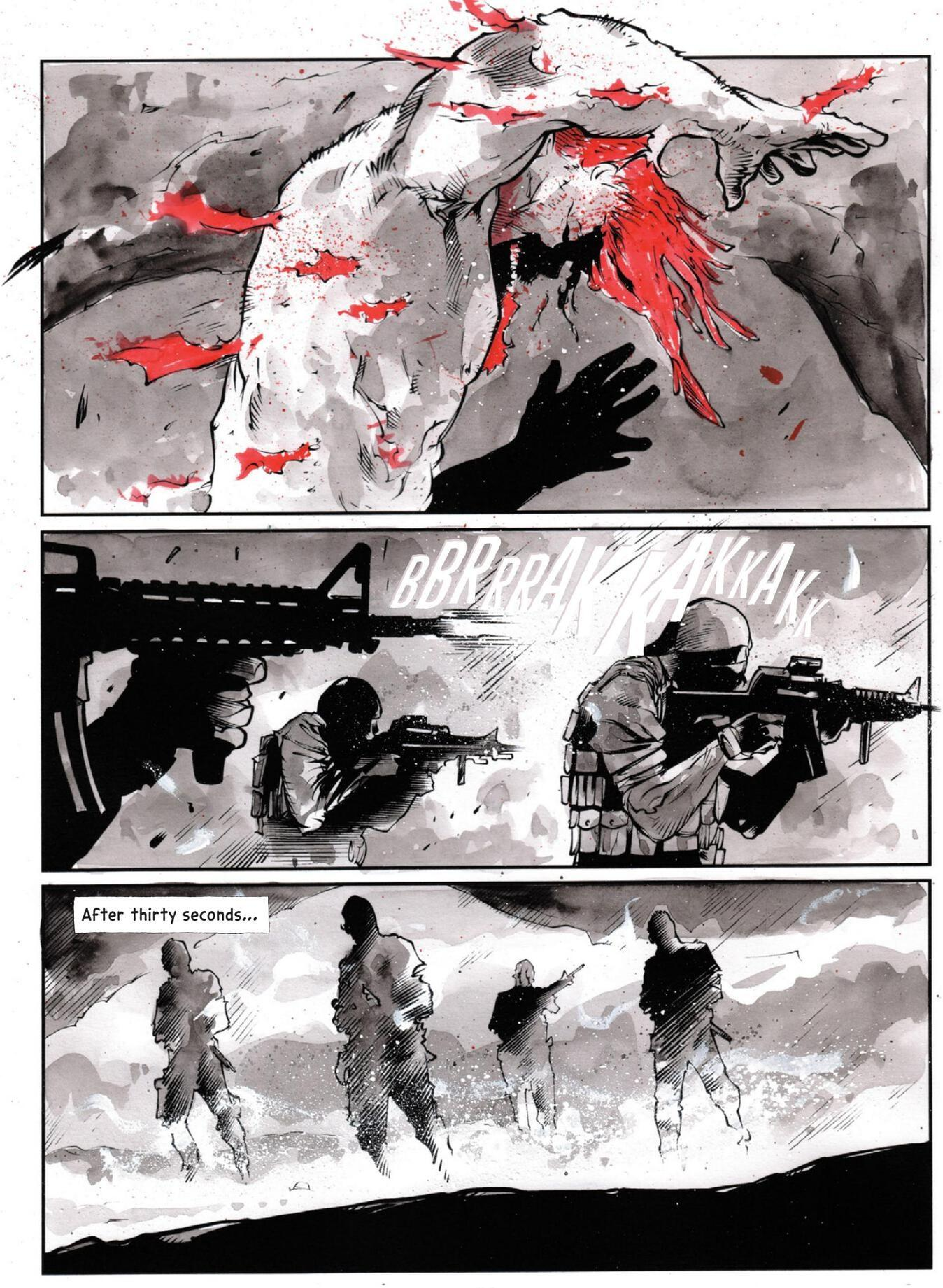

...a *giant.*

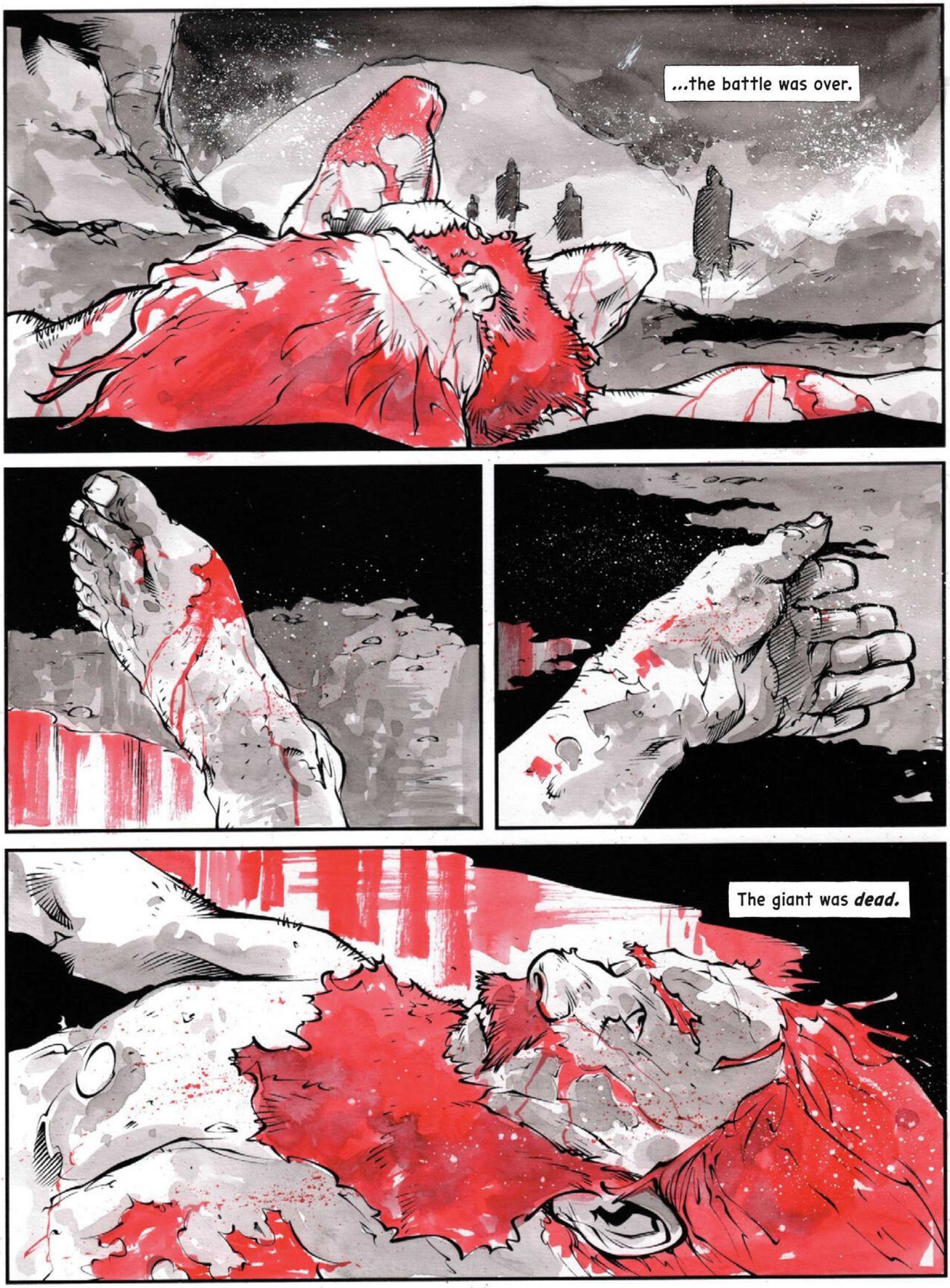


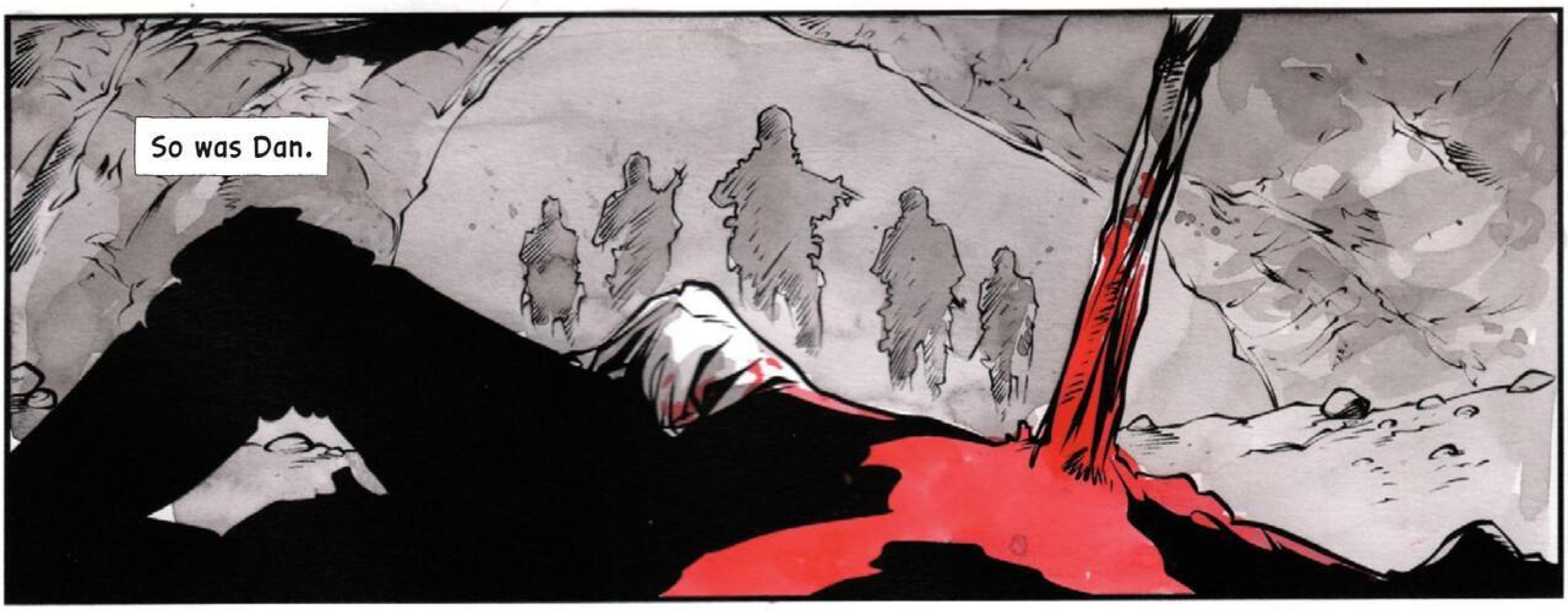


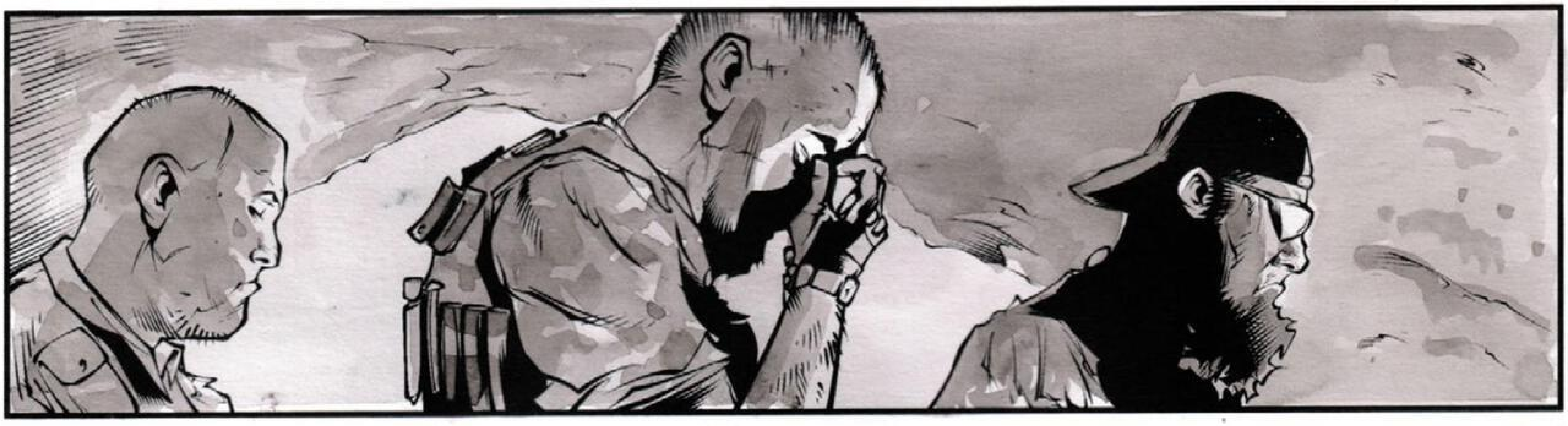

Fifteen feet tall.
The giant *ran* to retrieve its spear from Dan's body so it could attack again.

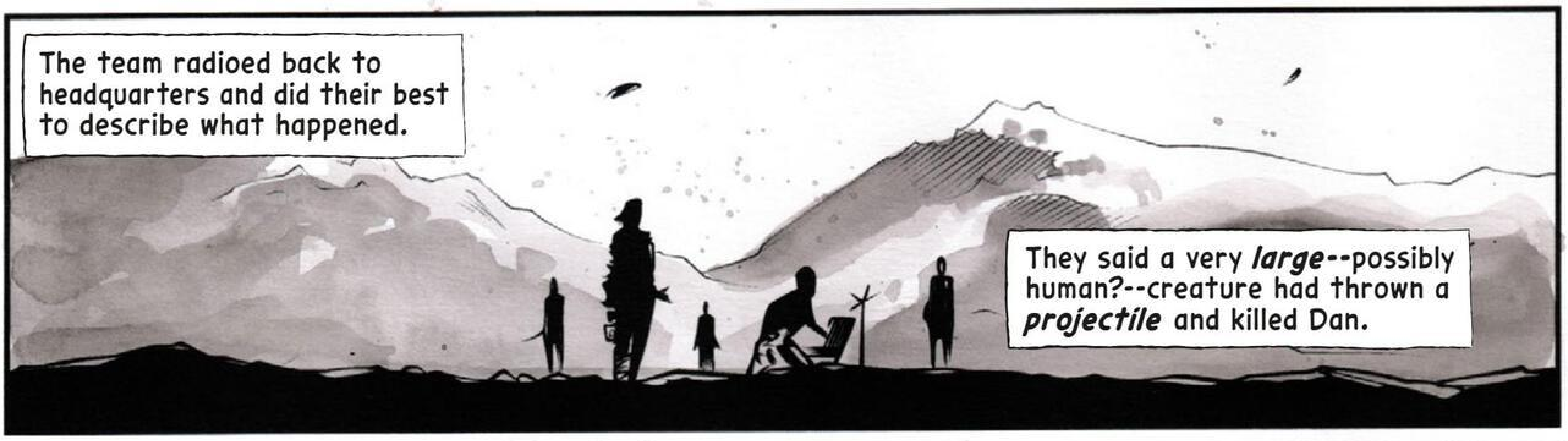

BRRAK
BRRAKK
The Green Berets ***engaged.***
BRRAK

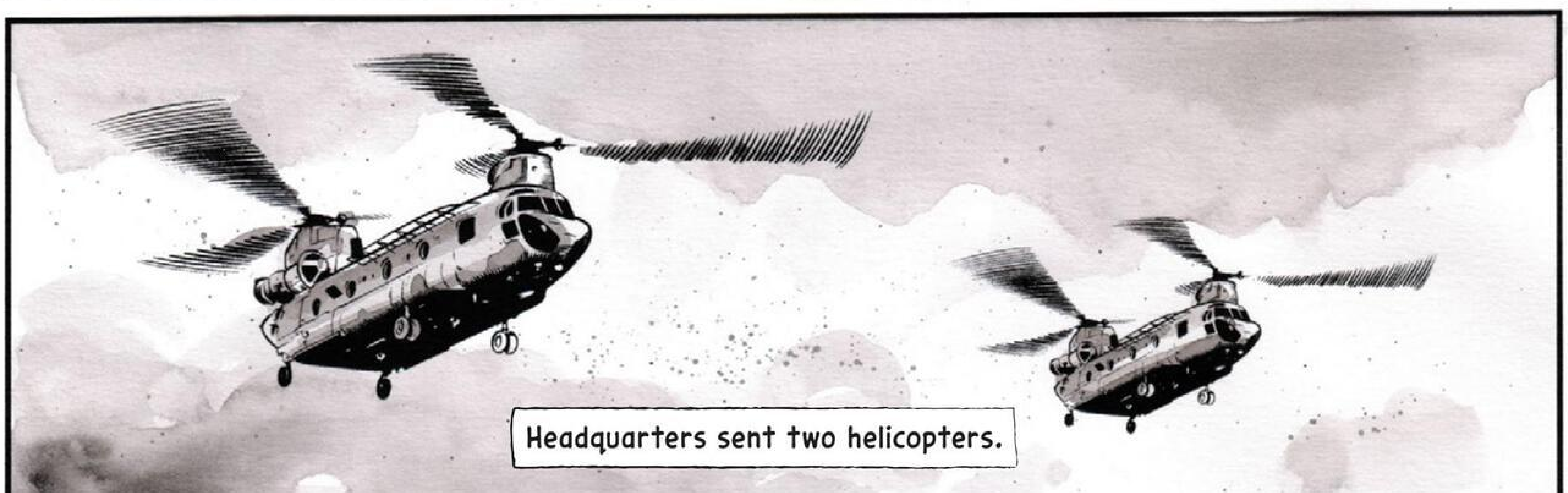

BBRRRRAKKAKKAKK
After thirty seconds...

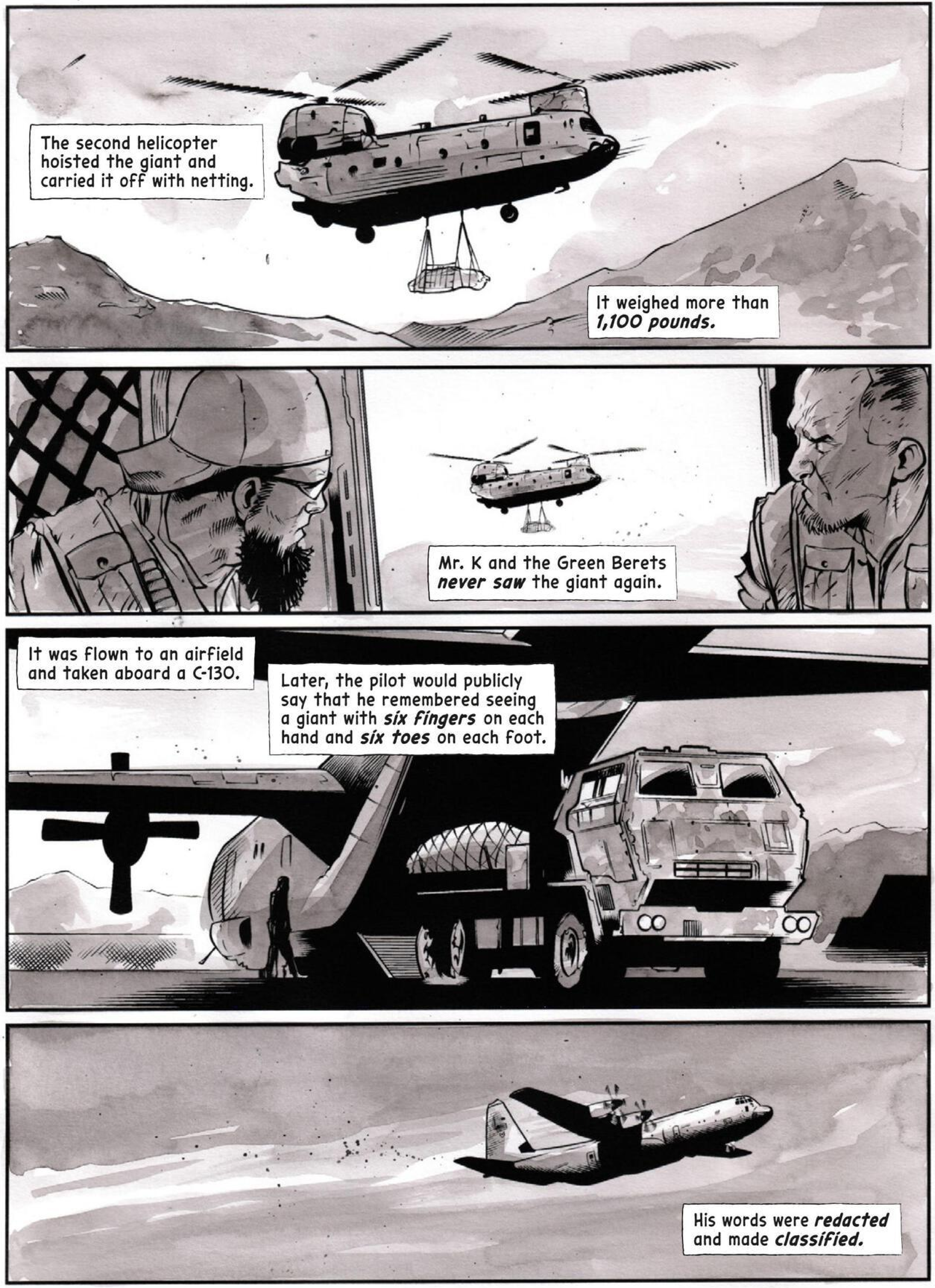

...the battle was over.
The giant was *dead.*

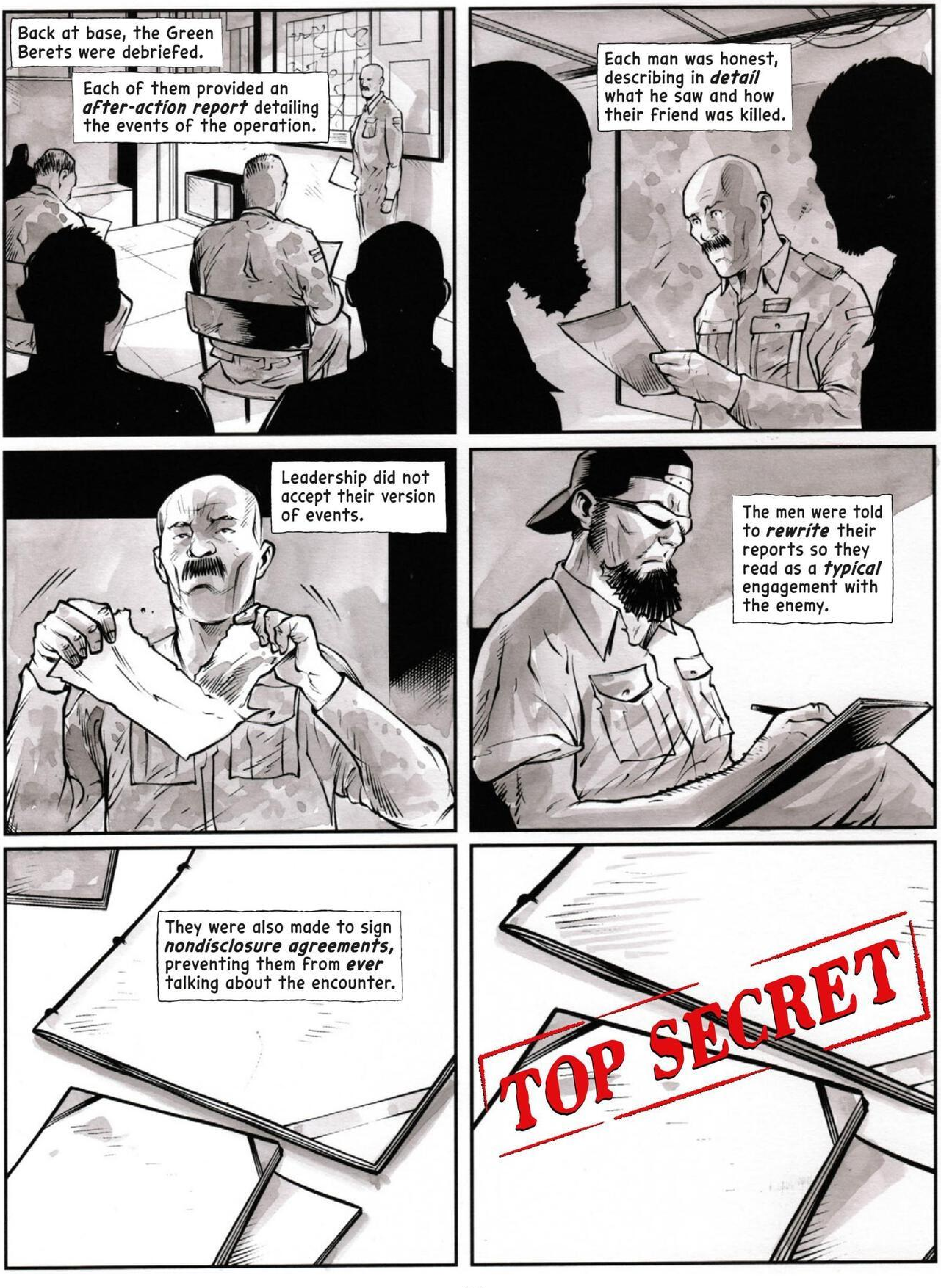

So was Dan.

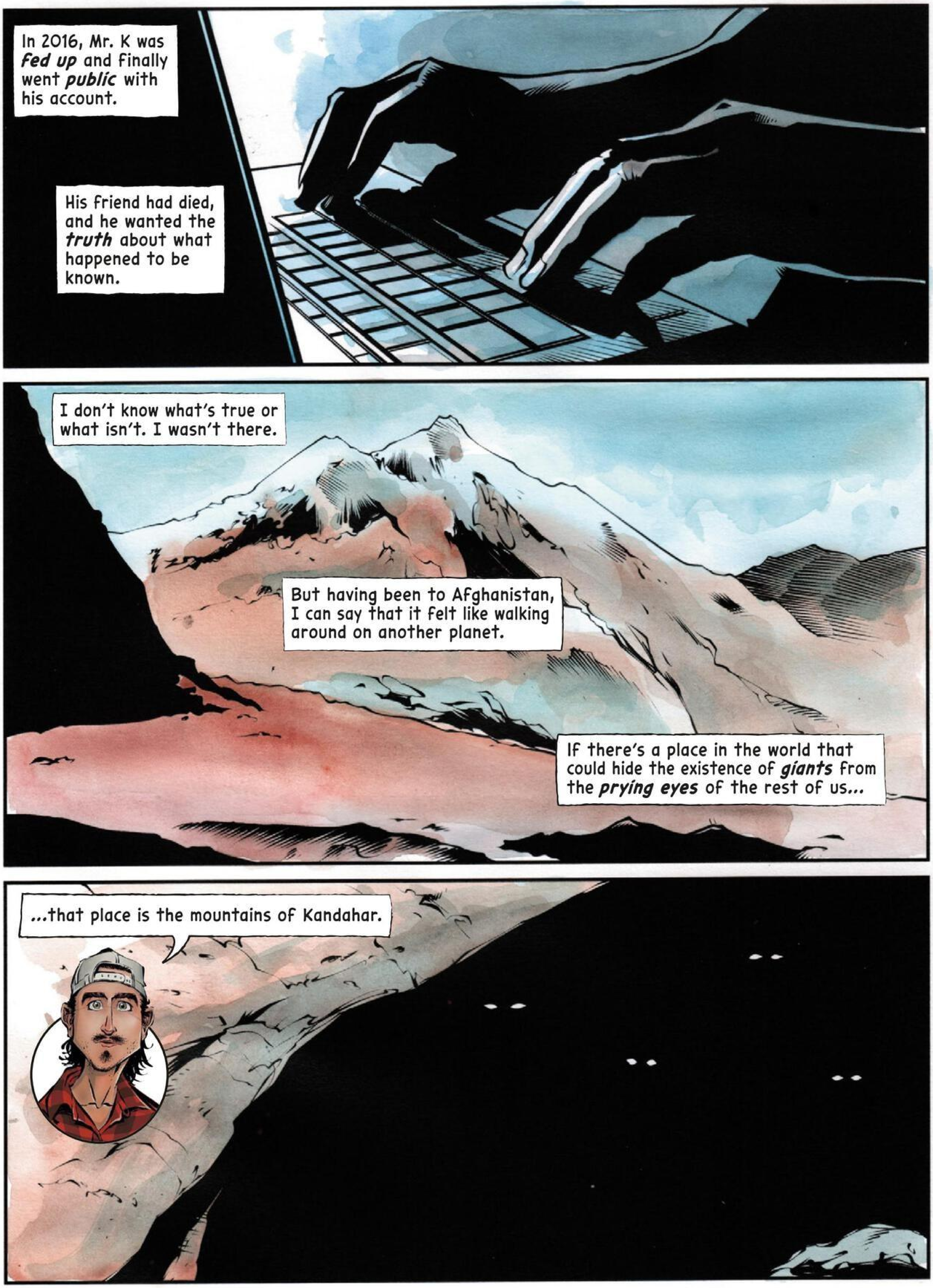



The team radioed back to headquarters and did their best to describe what happened.
They said a very *large*--possibly human?--creature had thrown a *projectile* and killed Dan.

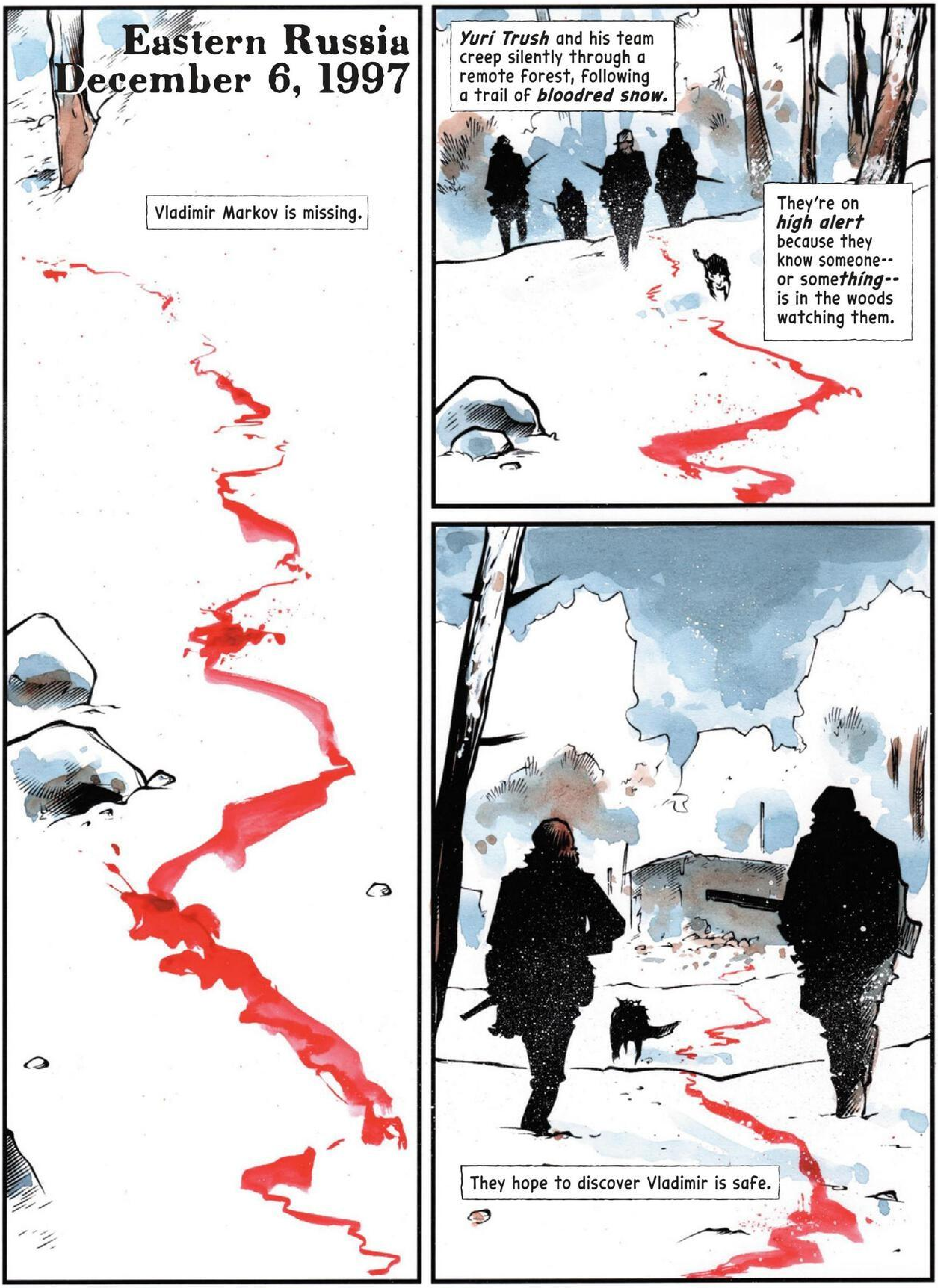

Headquarters sent two helicopters.
One retrieved the team and Dan's remains.


The second helicopter hoisted the giant and carried it off with netting.
It weighed more than *1,100 pounds.*
Mr. K and the Green Berets *never saw* the giant again.
It was flown to an airfield and taken aboard a C-130.
Later, the pilot would publicly say that he remembered seeing a giant with *six fingers* on each hand and *six toes* on each foot.
His words were *redacted* and made *classified.*

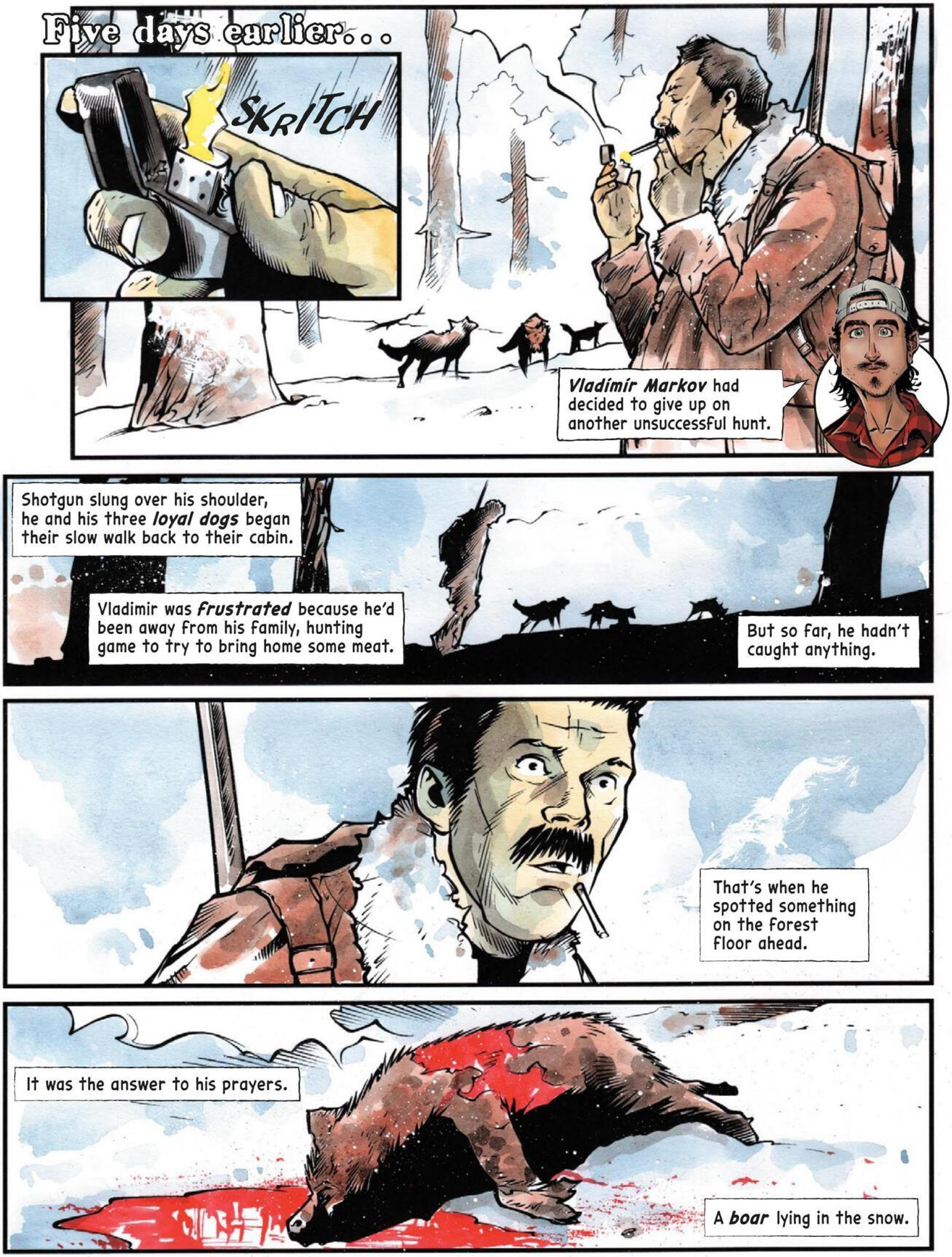

Back at base, the Green Berets were debriefed.
Each of them provided an *after-action report* detailing the events of the operation.
Each man was honest, describing in *detail* what he saw and how their friend was killed.
Leadership did not accept their version of events.
The men were told to *rewrite* their reports so they read as a *typical* engagement with the enemy.
They were also made to sign *nondisclosure agreements,* preventing them from *ever* talking about the encounter.
TOP SECRET

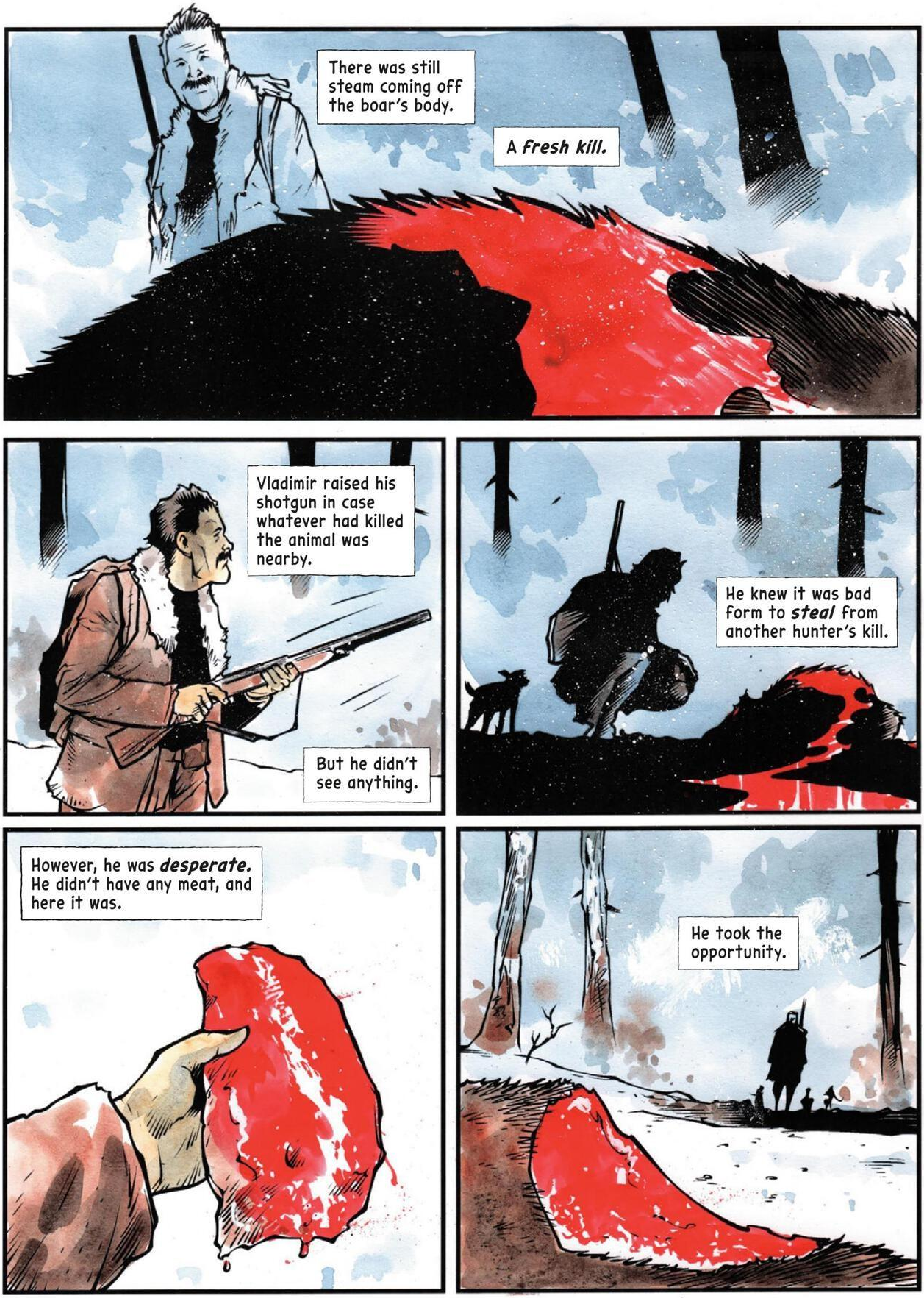

In 2016, Mr. K was *fed up* and finally went *public* with his account.
His friend had died, and he wanted the *truth* about what happened to be known.
I don't know what's true or what isn't. I wasn't there.
But having been to Afghanistan, I can say that it felt like walking around on another planet.
If there's a place in the world that could hide the existence of *giants* from the *prying eyes* of the rest of us...
...that place is the mountains of Kandahar.

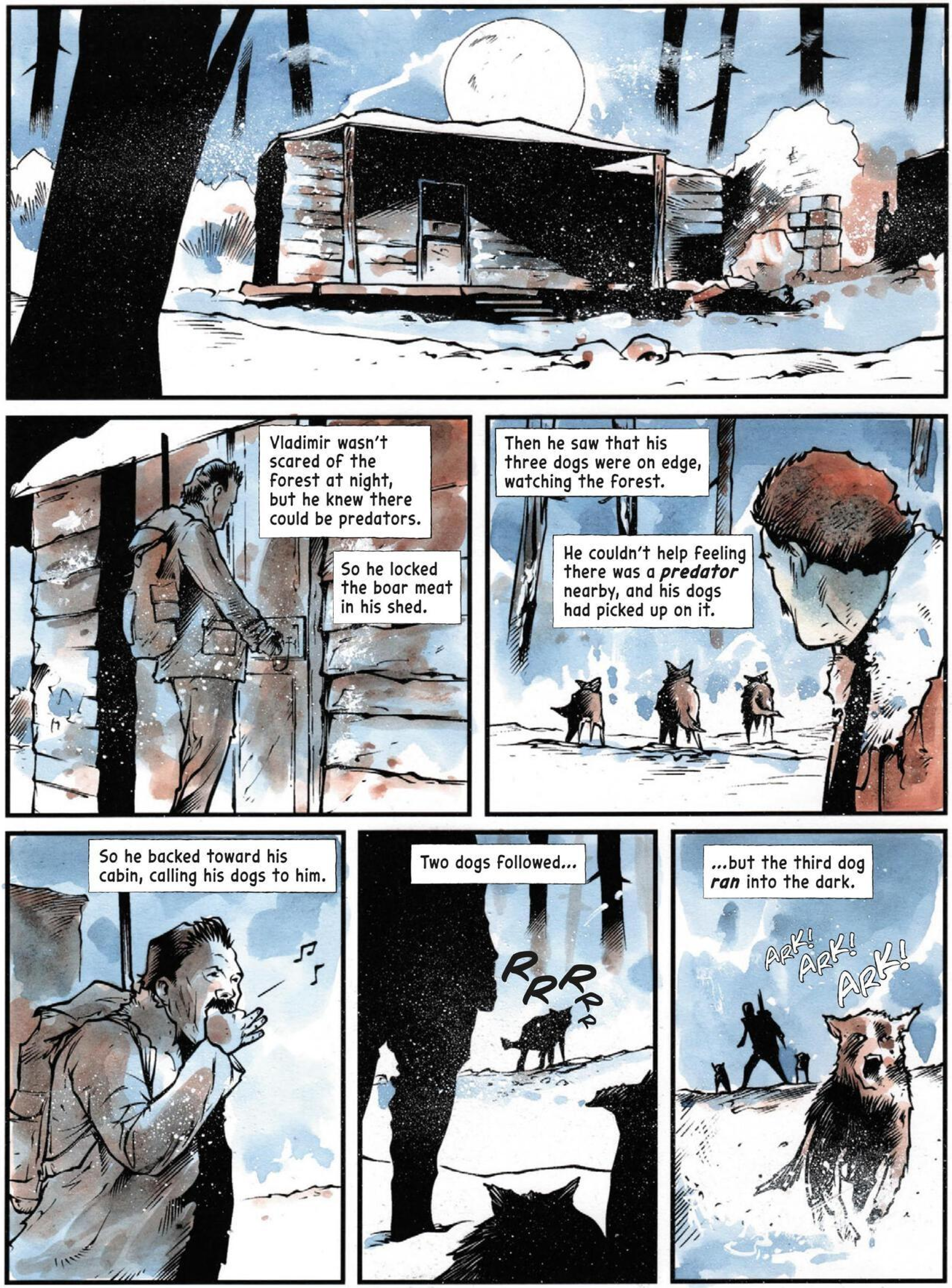
CAT AND MOUSE

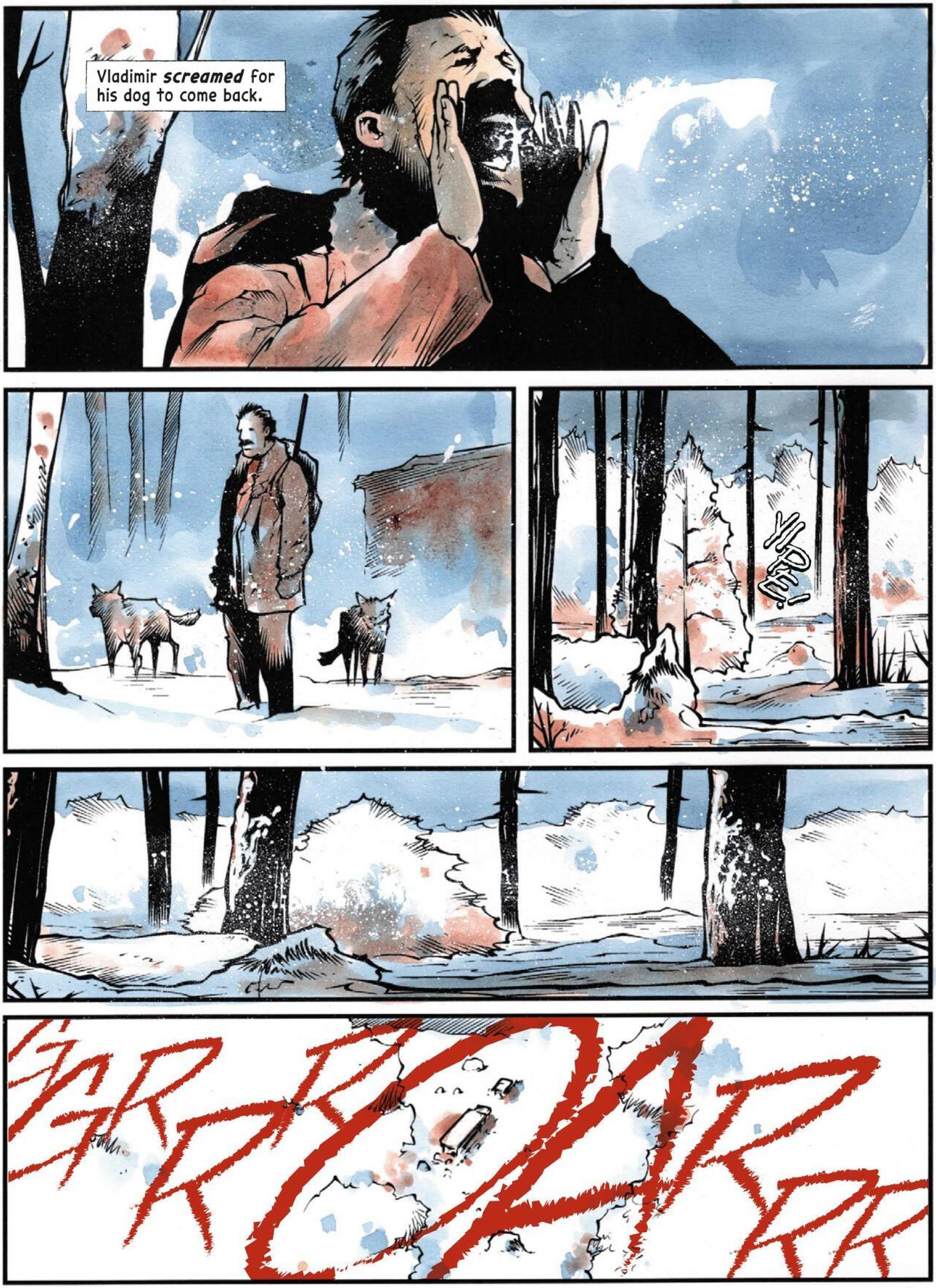

Eastern Russia
December 6, 1997
Vladimir Markov is missing.
Yuri Trush and his team creep silently through a remote forest, following a trail of ***bloodred snow.***
They're on ***high alert*** because they know someone-- or some***thing***-- is in the woods watching them.
They hope to discover Vladimir is safe.

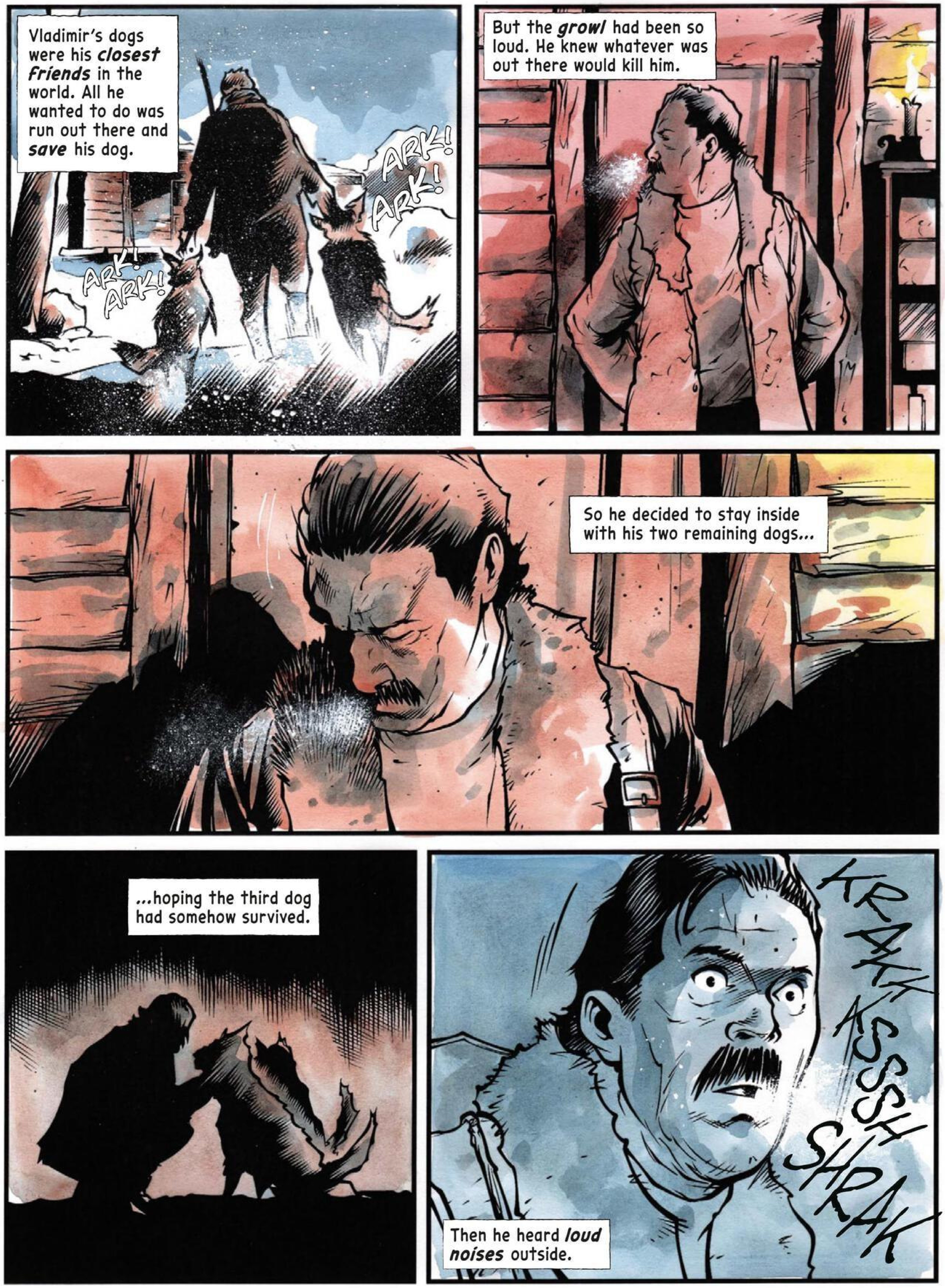
What they discover instead is much *worse.*

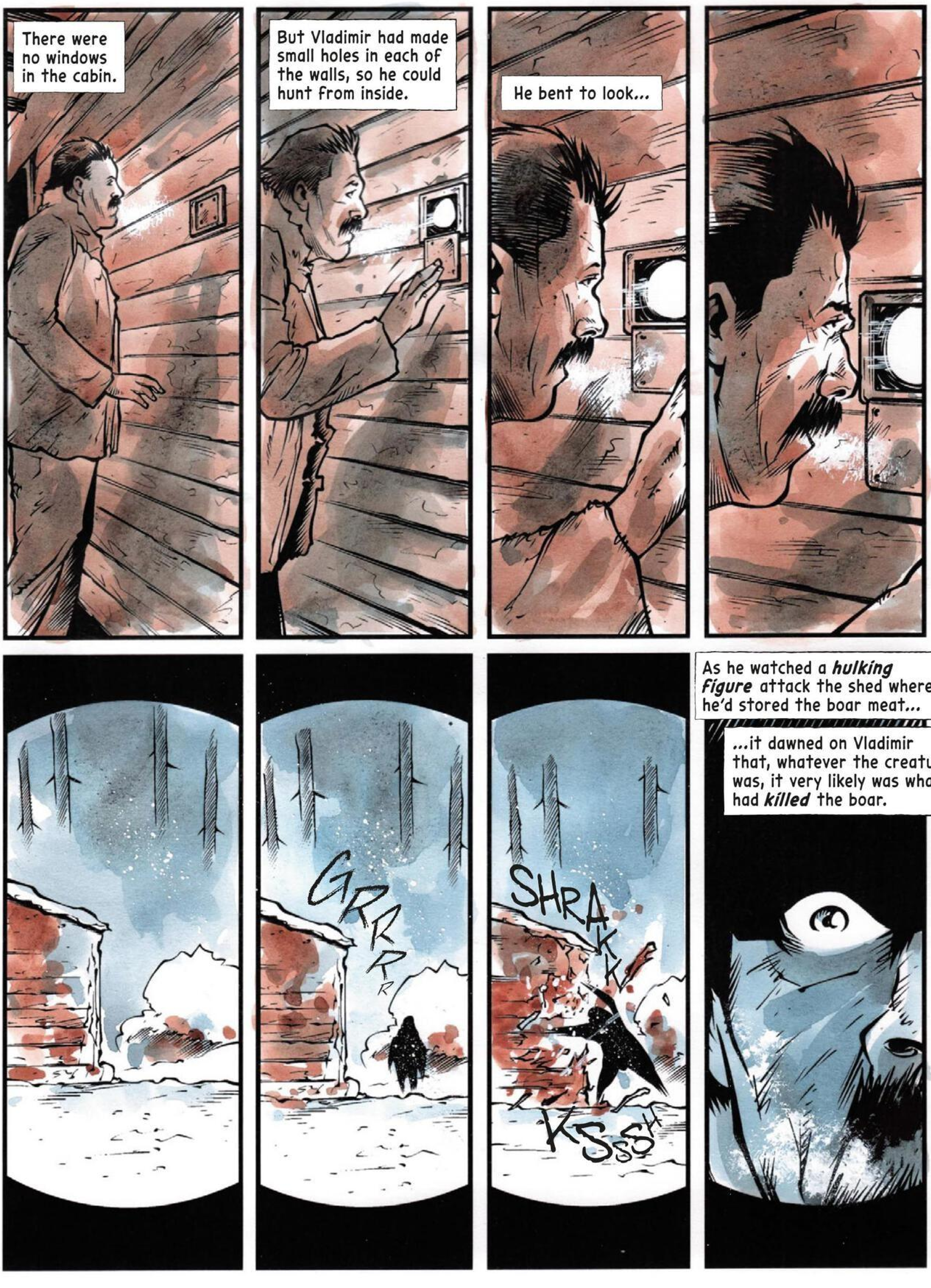

Five days earlier...
SKRITCH
Vladimir Markov had decided to give up on another unsuccessful hunt.
Shotgun slung over his shoulder, he and his three *loyal dogs* began their slow walk back to their cabin.
Vladimir was *frustrated* because he'd been away from his family, hunting game to try to bring home some meat.
But so far, he hadn't caught anything.
That's when he spotted something on the forest floor ahead.
It was the answer to his prayers.
A *boar* lying in the snow.

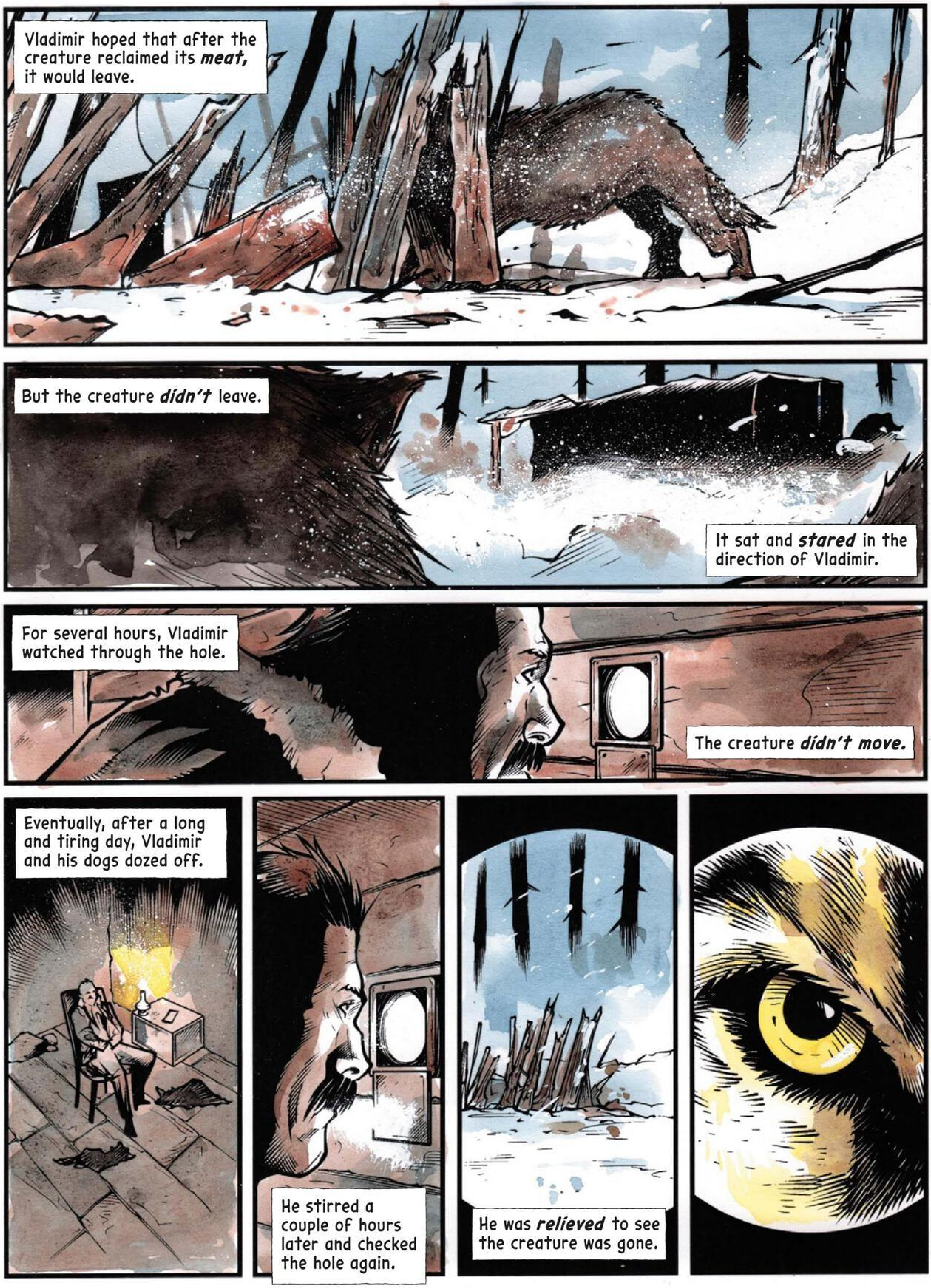

There was still steam coming off the boar's body.
A *fresh kill.*
Vladimir raised his shotgun in case whatever had killed the animal was nearby.
But he didn't see anything.
He knew it was bad form to ***steal*** from another hunter's kill.
However, he was ***desperate.*** He didn't have any meat, and here it was.
He took the opportunity.

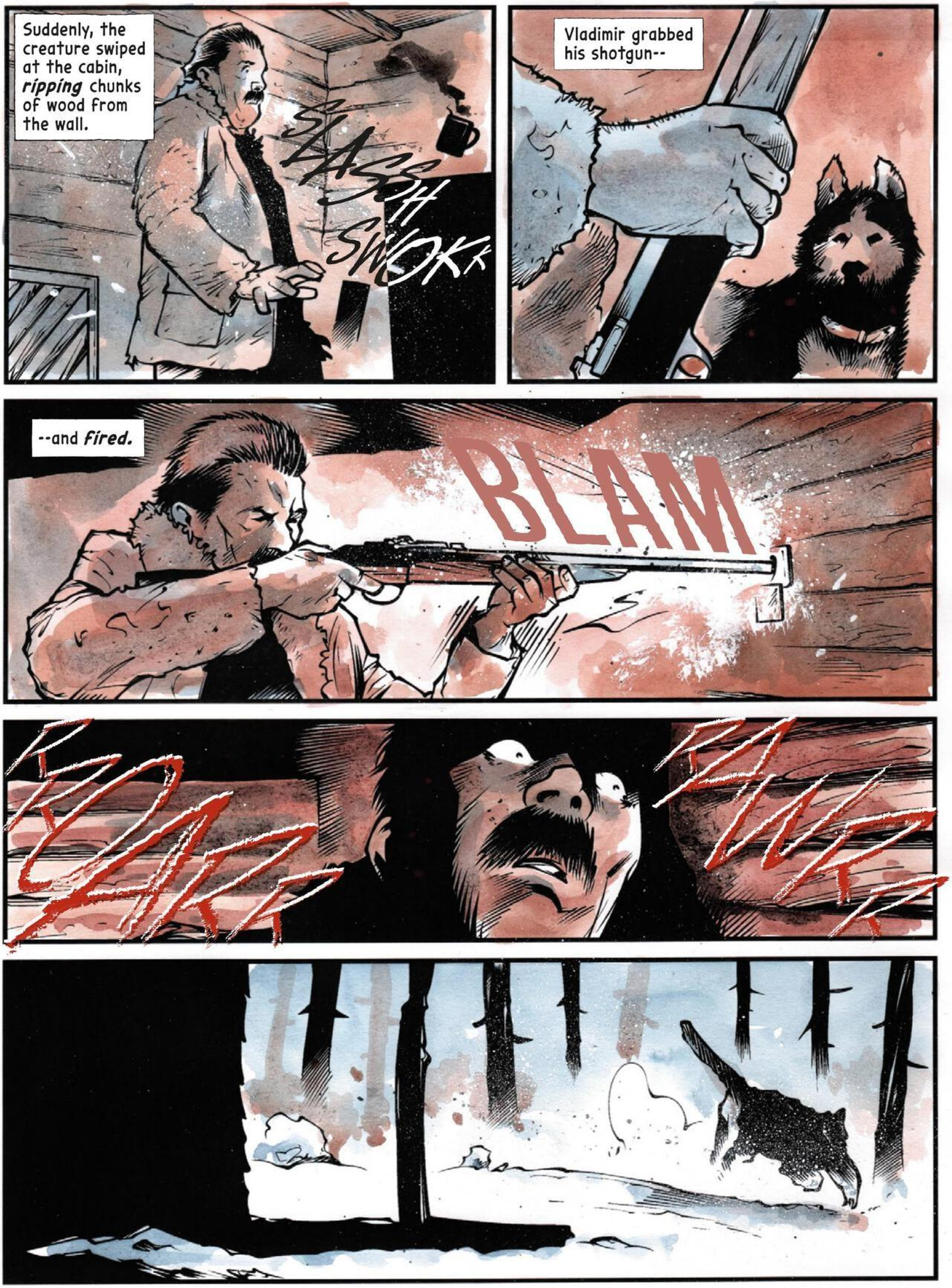

Vladimir wasn't scared of the forest at night, but he knew there could be predators.
So he locked the boar meat in his shed.
Then he saw that his three dogs were on edge, watching the forest.
He couldn't help feeling there was a ***predator*** nearby, and his dogs had picked up on it.
So he backed toward his cabin, calling his dogs to him.
Two dogs followed...
RRRRR
...but the third dog ***ran*** into the dark.
ARK! ARK! ARK!

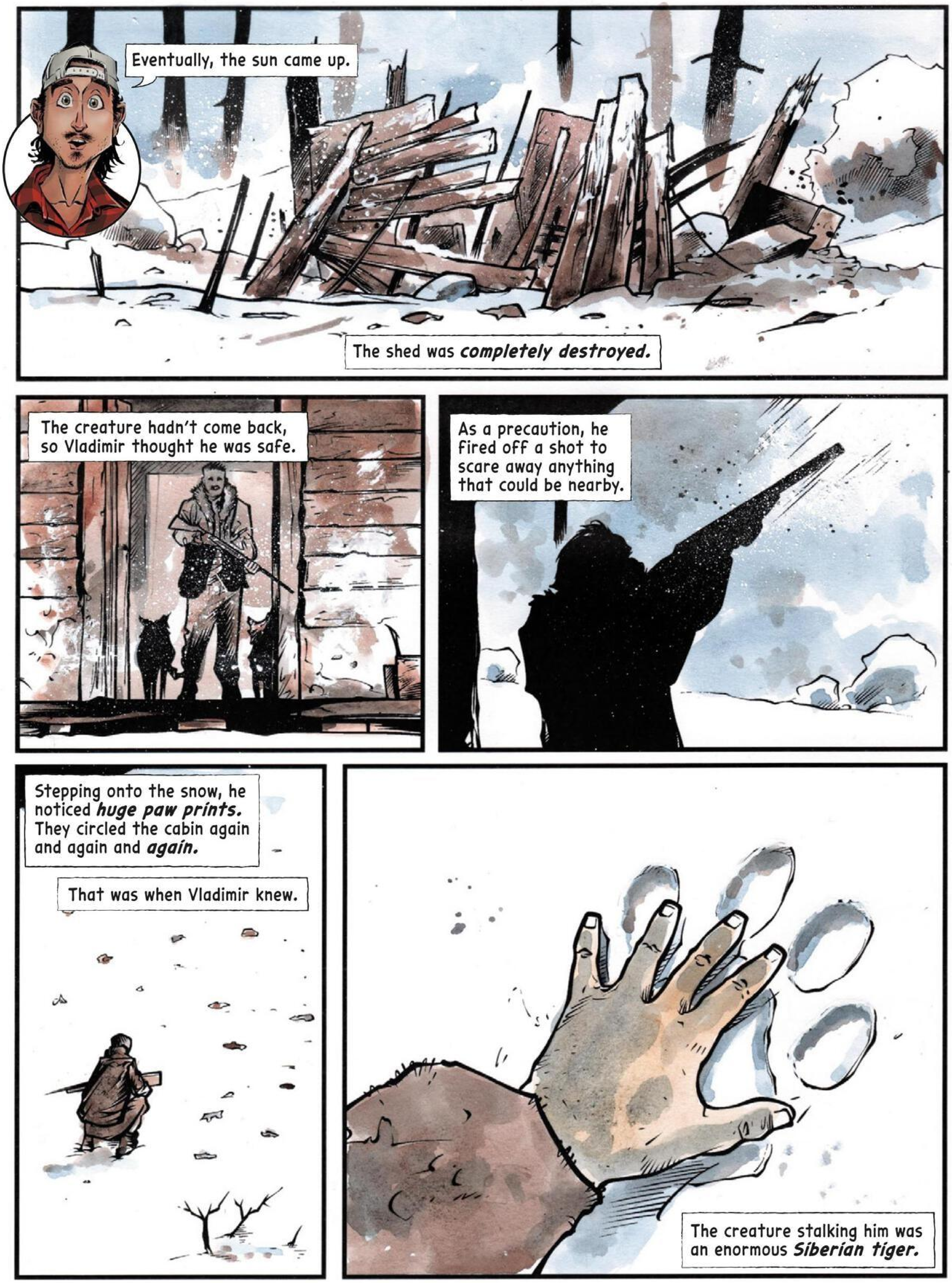

Vladimir **screamed** for his dog to come back.
YIPE!
GRRRROARRRR

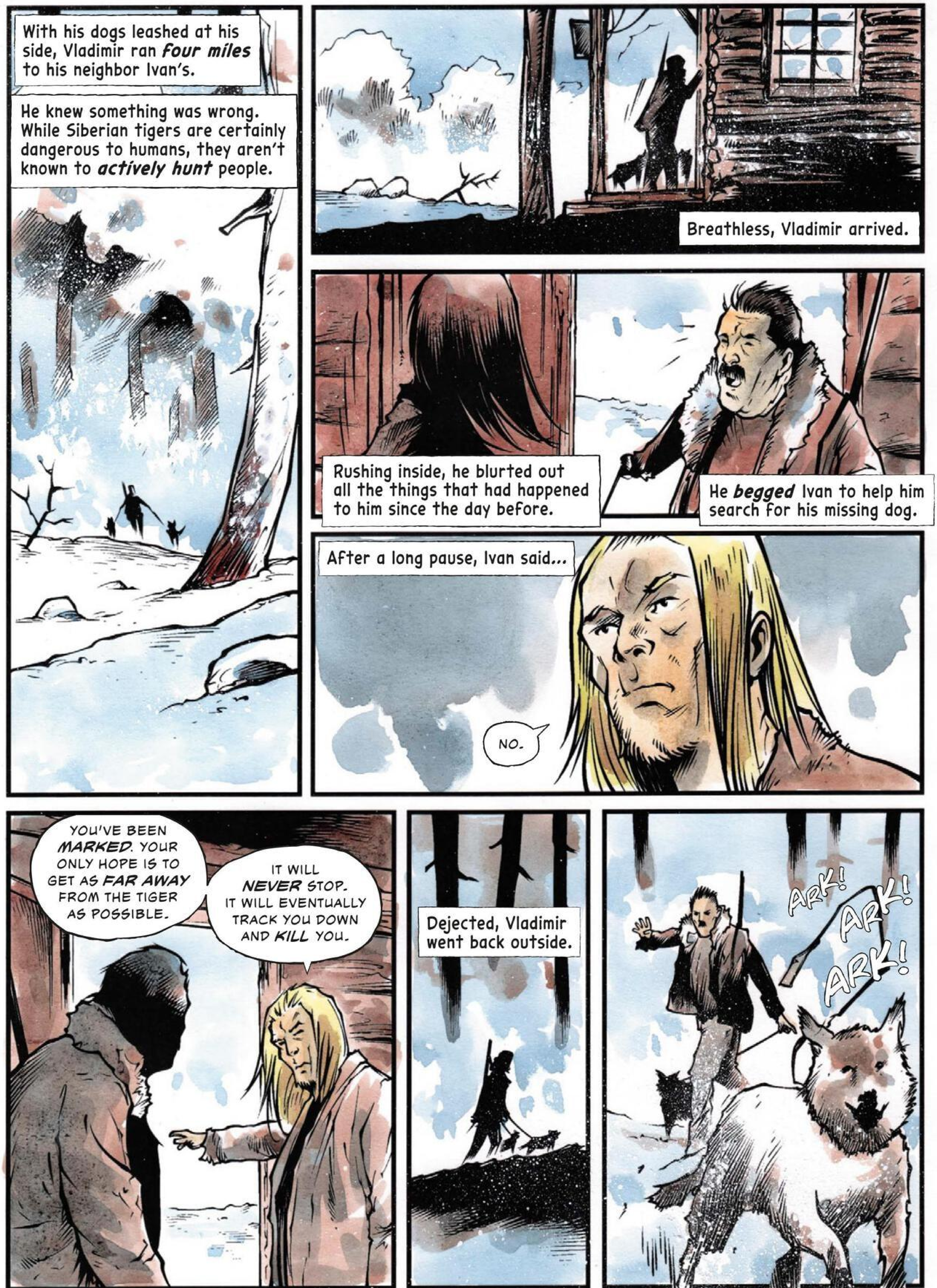

Vladimir's dogs were his ***closest friends*** in the world. All he wanted to do was run out there and ***save*** his dog.
ARK! ARK!
ARK! ARK!
But the ***growl*** had been so loud. He knew whatever was out there would kill him.
So he decided to stay inside with his two remaining dogs...
...hoping the third dog had somehow survived.
KRAKK
KSSSH
SHRAK
Then he heard ***loud noises*** outside.

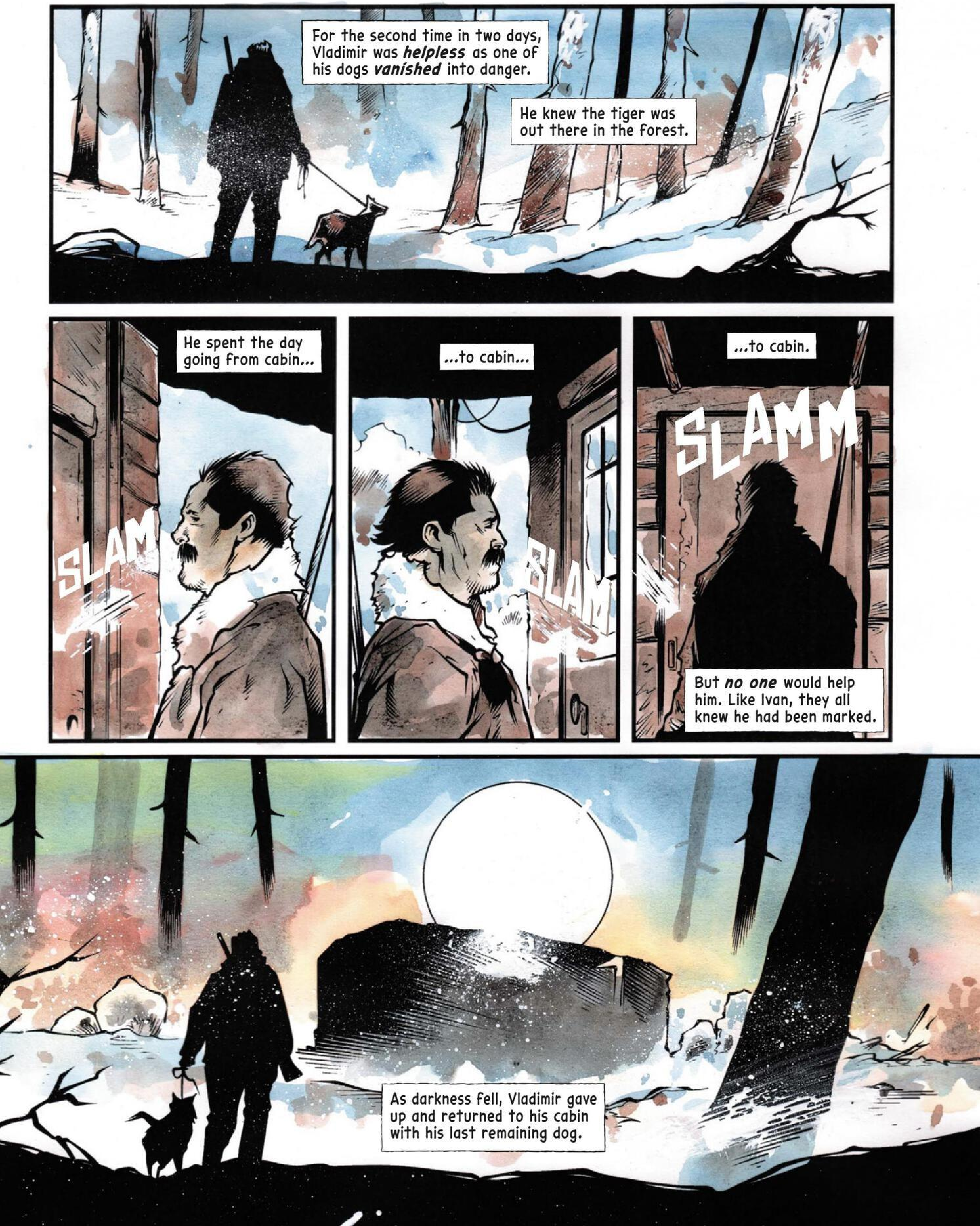

There were no windows in the cabin.
But Vladimir had made small holes in each of the walls, so he could hunt from inside.
He bent to look...
GRRRRR
SHRAKKK
KSSSH
As he watched a ***hulking figure*** attack the shed where he'd stored the boar meat...
...it dawned on Vladimir that, whatever the creature was, it very likely was what had ***killed*** the boar.

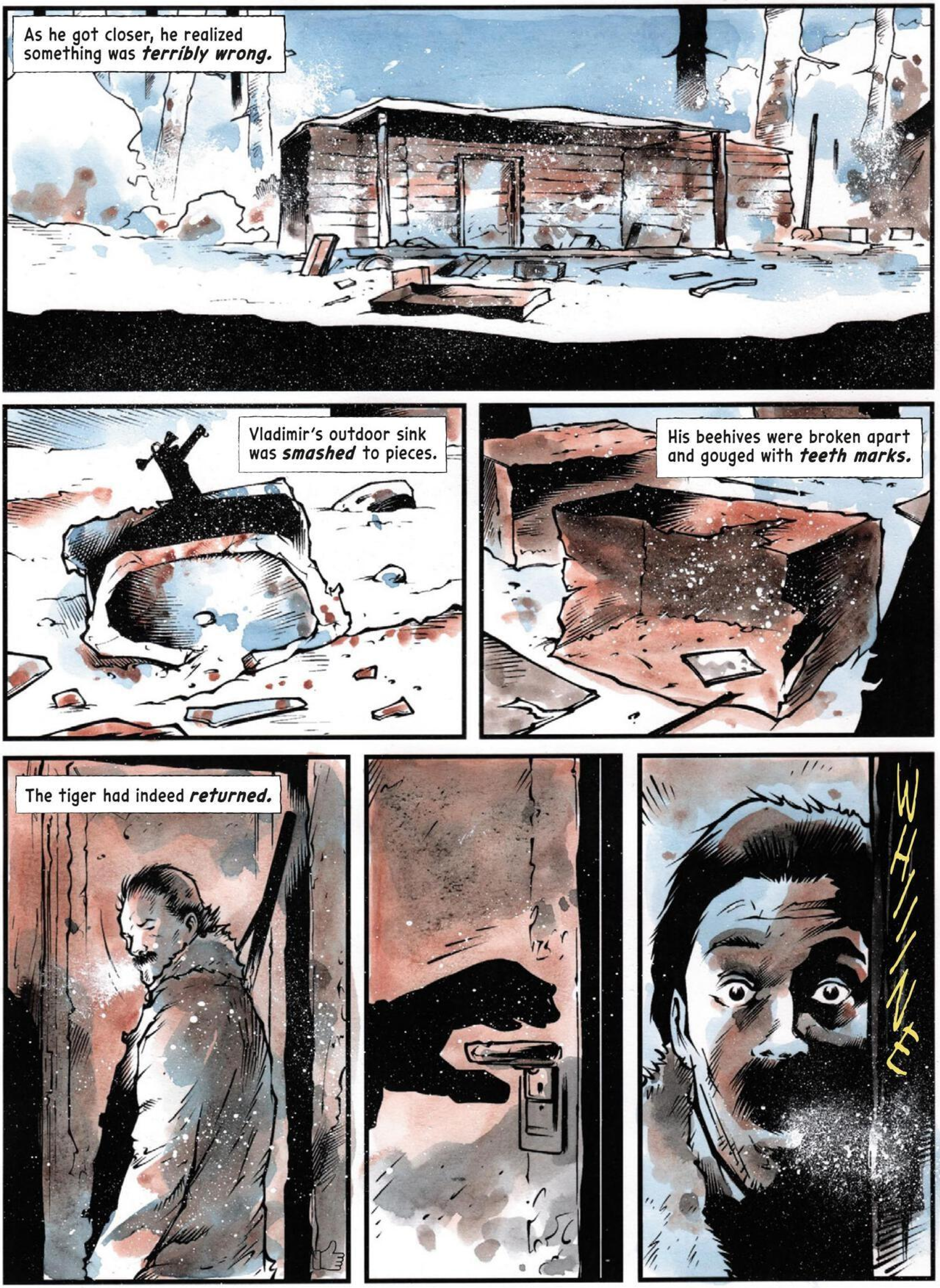

Vladimir hoped that after the creature reclaimed its ***meat,*** it would leave.
But the creature ***didn't*** leave.
It sat and ***stared*** in the direction of Vladimir.
For several hours, Vladimir watched through the hole.
The creature ***didn't move.***
Eventually, after a long and tiring day, Vladimir and his dogs dozed off.
He stirred a couple of hours later and checked the hole again.
He was ***relieved*** to see the creature was gone.

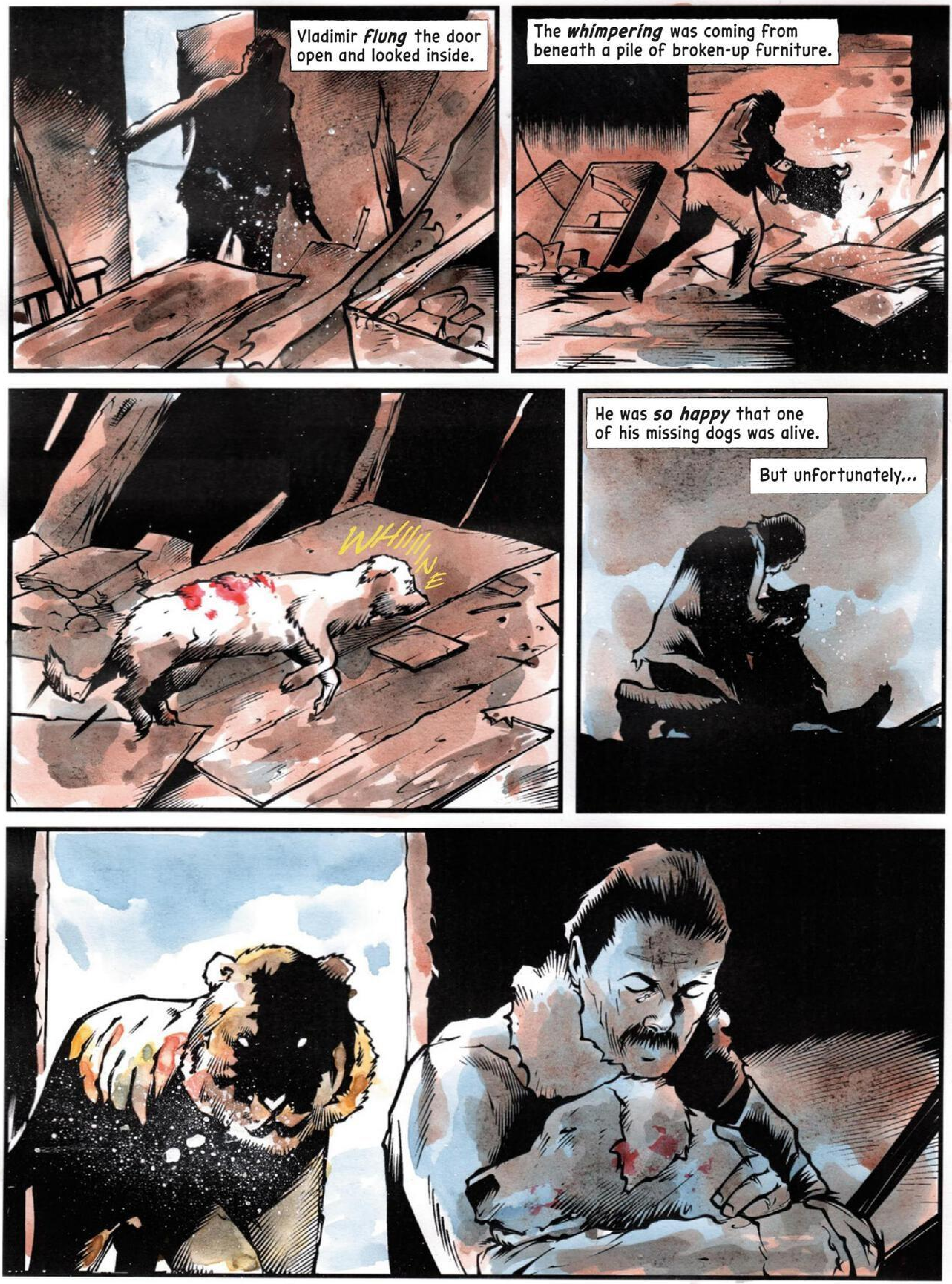

Suddenly, the creature swiped at the cabin, *ripping* chunks of wood from the wall.
SLASSH
SWOKK
Vladimir grabbed his shotgun--
--and *fired.*
BLAM
ROARRR
RAWRR

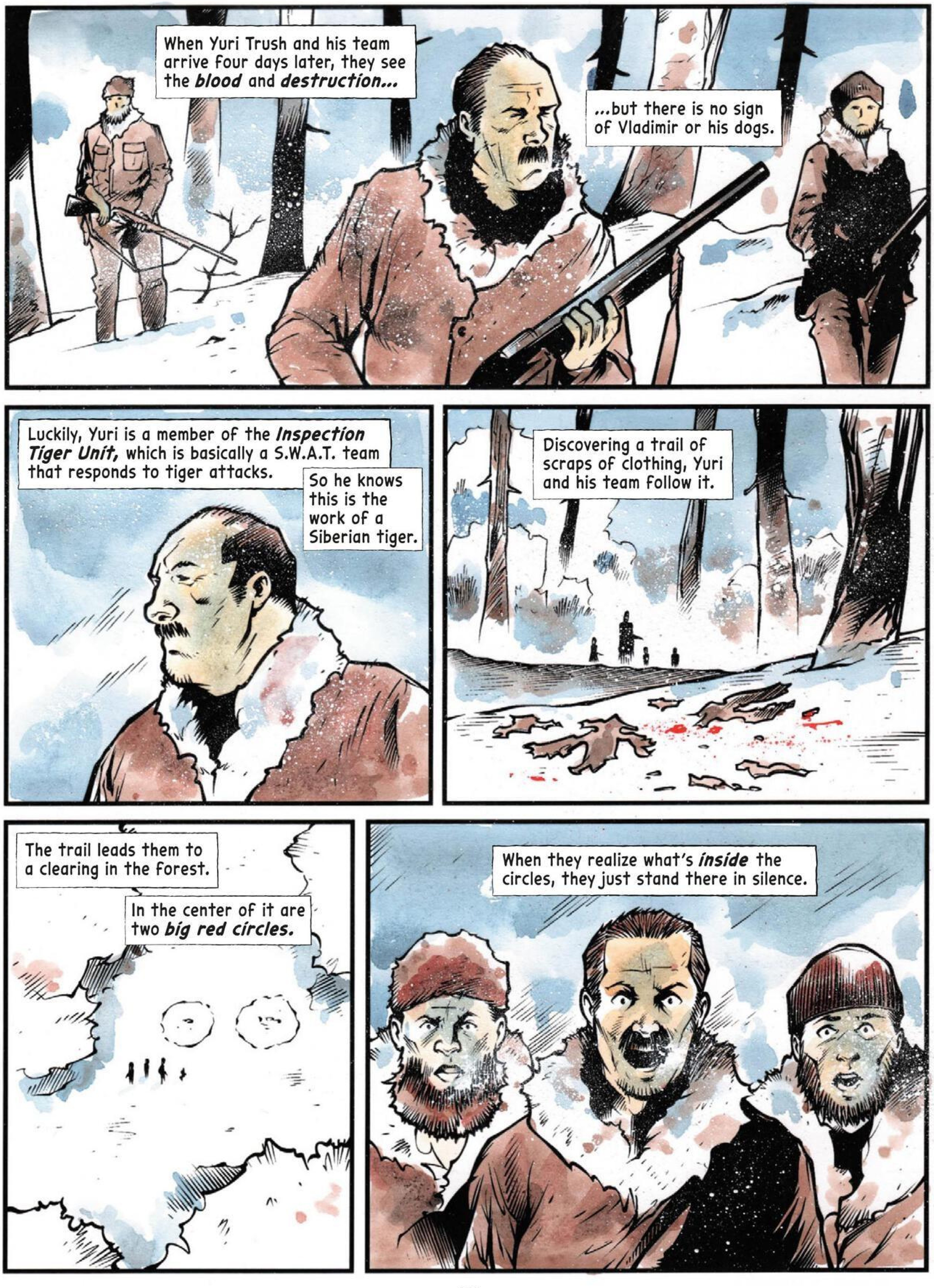

Eventually, the sun came up.
The shed was *completely destroyed.*
The creature hadn't come back, so Vladimir thought he was safe.
As a precaution, he fired off a shot to scare away anything that could be nearby.
Stepping onto the snow, he noticed *huge paw prints.* They circled the cabin again and again and *again.*
That was when Vladimir knew.
The creature stalking him was an enormous *Siberian tiger.*

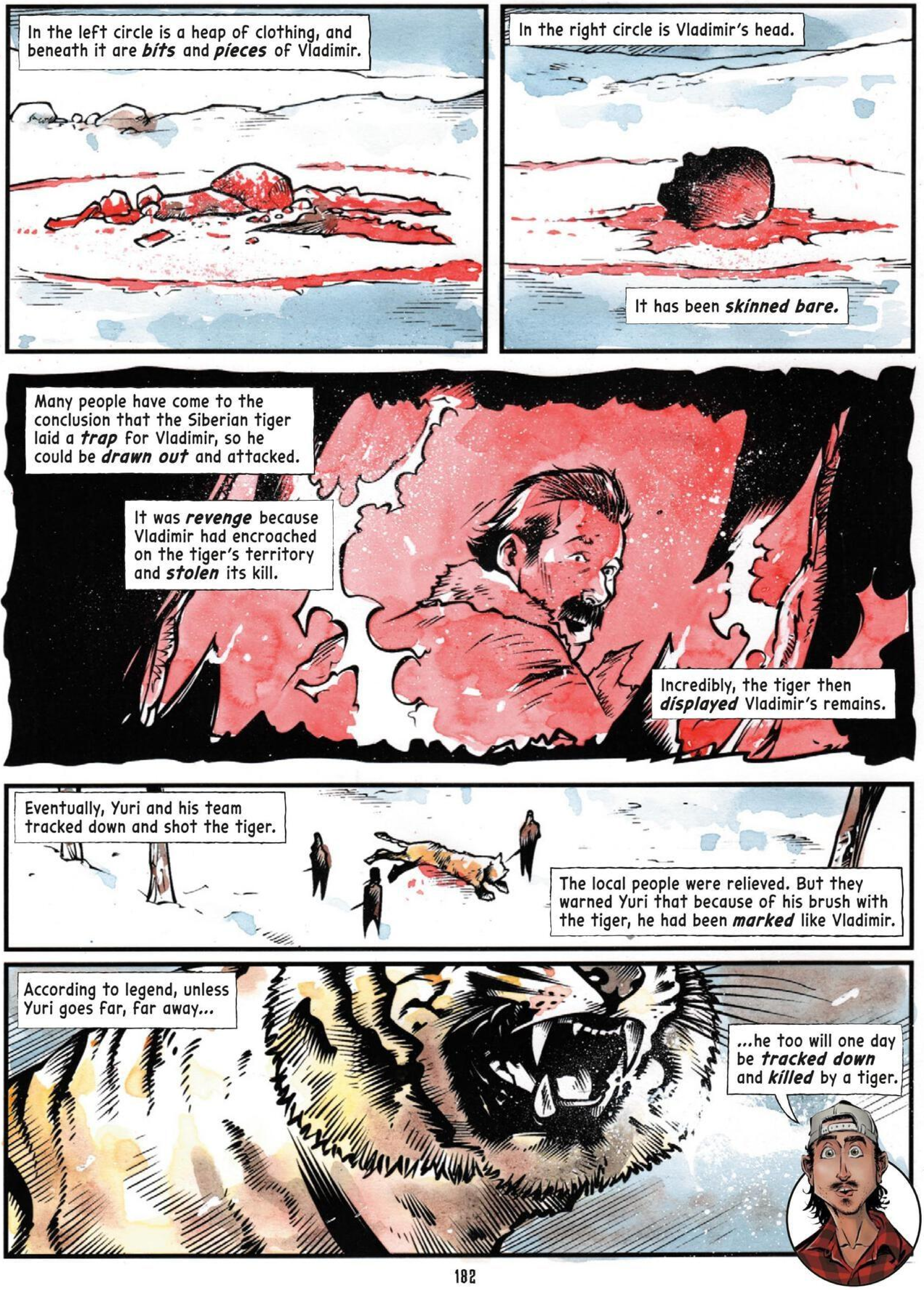

With his dogs leashed at his side, Vladimir ran ***four miles*** to his neighbor Ivan's.
He knew something was wrong. While Siberian tigers are certainly dangerous to humans, they aren't known to ***actively hunt*** people.
Breathless, Vladimir arrived.
Rushing inside, he blurted out all the things that had happened to him since the day before.
He ***begged*** Ivan to help him search for his missing dog.
After a long pause, Ivan said...
NO.
YOU'VE BEEN ***MARKED***. YOUR ONLY HOPE IS TO GET AS ***FAR AWAY*** FROM THE TIGER AS POSSIBLE.
IT WILL ***NEVER*** STOP. IT WILL EVENTUALLY TRACK YOU DOWN AND ***KILL*** YOU.
Dejected, Vladimir went back outside.
ARK! ARK! ARK!


For the second time in two days, Vladimir was ***helpless*** as one of his dogs ***vanished*** into danger.
He knew the tiger was out there in the forest.
He spent the day going from cabin...
SLAM
...to cabin...
SLAM
...to cabin.
SLAMM
But ***no one*** would help him. Like Ivan, they all knew he had been marked.
As darkness fell, Vladimir gave up and returned to his cabin with his last remaining dog.


As he got closer, he realized something was *terribly wrong.*
Vladimir's outdoor sink was *smashed* to pieces.
His beehives were broken apart and gouged with *teeth marks.*
The tiger had indeed *returned.*
WHIIINE


Vladimir *flung* the door open and looked inside.
The *whimpering* was coming from beneath a pile of broken-up furniture.
WHIIIIINE
He was *so happy* that one of his missing dogs was alive.
But unfortunately...


When Yuri Trush and his team arrive four days later, they see the ***blood*** and ***destruction...***
...but there is no sign of Vladimir or his dogs.
Luckily, Yuri is a member of the ***Inspection Tiger Unit,*** which is basically a S.W.A.T. team that responds to tiger attacks.
So he knows this is the work of a Siberian tiger.
Discovering a trail of scraps of clothing, Yuri and his team follow it.
The trail leads them to a clearing in the forest.
In the center of it are two ***big red circles.***
When they realize what's ***inside*** the circles, they just stand there in silence.


In the left circle is a heap of clothing, and beneath it are *bits* and *pieces* of Vladimir.
In the right circle is Vladimir's head.
It has been *skinned bare.*
Many people have come to the conclusion that the Siberian tiger laid a *trap* for Vladimir, so he could be *drawn out* and attacked.
It was *revenge* because Vladimir had encroached on the tiger's territory and *stolen* its kill.
Incredibly, the tiger then *displayed* Vladimir's remains.
Eventually, Yuri and his team tracked down and shot the tiger.
The local people were relieved. But they warned Yuri that because of his brush with the tiger, he had been *marked* like Vladimir.
According to legend, unless Yuri goes far, far away...
...he too will one day be *tracked down* and *killed* by a tiger.

FURTHER READING

All the stories in this book are based on real-life events and told in story format. Some are drawn from the first-hand accounts of the people who lived them. Others include details found in newspapers, public documents, or interviews.

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Better known as “MrBallen,” JOHN B. ALLEN is a former U.S. Navy SEAL, the founder of the multi-platform content company Ballen Studios, and the creator and host of the popular podcast *MrBallen Podcast: Strange, Dark & Mysterious Stories*. Allen uses his platform to give back and founded the MrBallen Foundation with the mission to honor victims and support families of heinous crimes through education, training, and financial support. Allen resides in Austin, Texas, with his wife and three children.

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ABOUT BALLEN STUDIOS

Ballen Studios is a global, multi-platform content company that develops and produces projects spanning film, television, publishing, live touring, merchandising, audio, and digital-first mediums. Founded by top podcast host and one of the internet's biggest storytellers, John B. Allen—better known to fans as MrBallen—Ballen Studios was established to propel the art of storytelling to new heights and connect to audiences around the world.

Ballen Studios is led by CEO Nick Witters, who has worked in the top echelons of both traditional Hollywood and digital media. The leadership and creative team includes Hollywood sound engineers, Emmy and Peabody Award–winning producers, Pulitzer Prize–winning journalists, and MrBallen's mom.

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